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THE WIDOWED BRIDE.

By LUCY RANDALL COMFORT.

THE

Select Series

No. 75.

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The Widowed Bride;

OR,

THE MYSTERY OF GLENHAMPTON.

BY

LUCY RANDALL COMFORT,

AUTHOR OF

"CECILLE'S MARRIAGE," "GRATIA'S TRIALS," ETC.

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THE WIDOWED BRIDE.

CHAPTER I.

ALICE AND RENA.

The declining sun of a cloudless September day was irradiating, with its level beams, a peaceful Kentish landscape, traversed in a north-easterly direction by the shining tides of the river Medway, while the purple crests of a range of not inconsiderable hills, outlined against the horizon, were wrapped in a vail of tender haze, and the vivid green of the road-side hedges suggested spring, rather than early autumn, to the casual observer.

Under the plumy shadows of the dense-growing hedges, upon the short, velvety grass of the road-side, an old man sat, his shoes and garments powdered over with dust, while two little girls, apparently eight or nine years of age, played and frisked round him—brown-faced, hardy-looking little elves, with bare feet, ragged calico frocks, and tangled hair insufficiently protected from the sunshine by tattered straw hats tied under the chin. At the first glance they seemed to bear a singular resemblance to one another—at the second an observant eye could detect a wide difference. The taller, and apparently the elder by a year or so, was dark, with large, hazel eyes, fringed by long lashes, hair growing low upon her forehead, and teeth that shone like pearls between her rosy, parted lips; while the smaller and slighter of the two was fair, where the shadow of her frayed hat had, in some measure, kept the sunshine from her brow, with brown

hair flecked with shifting lights of gold, and eyes of violet gray, full of limpid depths that seemed to sparkle far down below the irids.

"Grandpapa! grandpapa!" this fair-haired sprite called out, pulling vehemently at the skirts of the old man's coat, "me and Rena climbed up on the stile, and we saw, oh, such a many people way off, picking hops, and there were little girls like us—can't we go, too? Grandpapa, are you asleep?"

The old man slowly opened his eyes.

"No, child, no; I was not asleep. Let us go on, Alice—we cannot be far off, now!"

"But, look, grandpapa!" coaxed the child, as he rose with difficulty from his sitting posture, and she stood on tiptoe to peep over the rustic stile, where the other child was already balancing herself like a young acrobat.

It was indeed a pretty, rural picture, the hop-pickers seeming to swarm over the fields below, while the river, winding through the meads like a ribbon of silver, lay beyond, and almost completely embowered in woods, the turrets of a stately pile of architecture rose up between, and a sylvan village nestled in the hollow, scarcely more than a mile or two distant.

"Grandpapa!" exclaimed little Rena, shading her eyes from the sun with one brown hand, "is that the place we're goin' to?"

"Are you tired, my child?" asked the man, mournfully, as he laid one hand on her shoulder.

"Yes—no!" said Rena, doubtfully. "But we've walked a long way, and Alice's feet are blistered. Grandpapa, is this the place you used to live when you were a little boy?"

"Hereabouts!" he replied, absently.

"But show me the house, grandpapa!"

"When we come to it, child, when we come to it," he answered, with a sigh. "Come, Alice—come Rena; we've a weary way to walk yet."

Little Rena skipped down from the stile with a child's elasticity, and caught hold of the old man's hand.

"Come on, then," she cried. "Alice, you may have my shoe, if you like—the one that the sole isn't gone. It is pretty good if you step on your toes."

"My foot don't hurt me so much now," said Alice, "since I tied the green leaves round it, and grandpapa says we're most there. Oh, Rena, see that big butterfly!—isn't it

splendid? Grandpapa, we never saw any such butterflies when we lived up among the mountains."

Jason Garfield did not answer. In truth and in fact he heard not a word of the children's merry babble as he plodded on over the level roads that had been familiar to his feet years and years ago. Just then he was existing not so much in the present as in the past.

"I wonder what she will say to me?" he thought. "She'll be angered sore, I'm afeared—and she wasn't a woman any one would like to face in her angry moods—but it isn't nature to expect a man to keep away from his own native place forever. I could have lived in them furrin' parts, but when it came to *die* there—and I mistrust me the end isn't far off now, for I've lived my three-score years and ten, and the old machinery's pretty well-nigh rusted out. I wouldn't betray *her,* but I can't die with *that secret* on my soul. No, no; I'll give it back to her—I'll give it back to her, and——"

"Give what back, grandpapa?" asked a small, wondering voice, and little Alice's blue-gray eyes gazed up into his own. "Grandpapa, what are you talking about?"

"Was I talking?" said the old man, with a guilty flush on his cheek. "Some nonsense—some old song I used to hum, like enough, when I was a boy. Don't you pay no attention to what the old man says, Allie—run on with your sister."

"I don't want to run," said the child, "my foot is sore. Did my father and mother live hereabouts, too, grandpapa?"

"Yes, child, yes! where should they live? and what makes you ask such silly questions?"

"I don't know," said Alice, mechanically, catching at the poppies that nodded their scarlet heads from the hedge rows as they passed. "I suppose I was thinking about my mother. It would be nice to have a mother, wouldn't it, grandpapa—a real mother all to myself, like other little girls?"

But before Jason Garfield could frame an answer, Rena, standing on the rise of a hill a few rods beyond, beckoned with her small hands, and called to her sister with noisy delight.

"Oh, come Allie, come! I see such a queer old church, with the steeple all covered with ivy, and a great, deep porch, where we can all sit down and rest on the stone steps. May we rest there, grandpapa?"

He nodded assent, and the little girls flew onward, while his weary footsteps followed at a slower and more measured pace.

"I mind it well," he thought to himself. "I've never forgotten St. Hilda's, all the time I've been away—no, nor ever shall. It's a sight good for sore eyes, to look upon that mossy old tower again; ay, that it is."

At the crest of the hills one seemed to come almost directly upon the church, which nestled away among stately yew trees and hedges of box, its shadows, drawn by the pencil of the sunset, lying over the peaceful rows of graves beyond, and the sound of a wayside fountain, walled by rude stones, and surmounted by the semblance of a roughly hewn cross, making a soft, rippling monotone through the summer evening silence.

Rena inclined forward and drank eagerly from the brimming surface.

"It's so good and so cold!" she cried, smacking her cherry lips merrily. "Come and drink, Allie; come, grandpapa!"

"St. Hilda's Cup!" said the old man, with a senile laugh. "Yes, yes, I remember it well. I used to drink here when I was a little mite of a thing, not so big as you are, lassies. Always cold, in the sultriest summer day! I wonder now, how many years——"

He stopped and shook his head, the bright drops yet sparkling on his grizzled beard, where he had quaffed the cool water.

"My memory's goin' from me, somehow," he murmured; "sense, and memory, and all else. It's time I came back to her; she was always stronger than me."

"Grandpapa," said Rena, her small form appearing suddenly from the deep shadow of the Gothic-built stone porch, "the church door is open, can we go in?"

He followed her slowly into the porch.

"Open, is it? They used to have evening service in harvest, in my time, and maybe they keep to the same old ways yet. Yes, go in, my lasses, but step soft, and don't talk and laugh out loud, like ye was in the sunshine and the open air."

"No, grandpapa, we won't," said Alice, as, holding tightly to her sister's hand, she crept into the church, close on her grandfather's heels.

It was a spacious, antiquely fashioned building, with a

deep semicircular chancel, where the blues, and ambers, and crimsons of the stained-glass windows played softly over the stone floor and carved altar-rails, while an irregularly built transept extended to the south, and two monumental figures cut in stone, to represent sleeping warriors, guarded either side.

"Grandpapa," whispered Alice, who was looking on with an awe-stricken face, "are they men?"

"What nonsense!" said the less impressible Rena; "don't you see they are only stone? And oh, what a curious place, all hung round with crimson silk curtains, and a little stone fire-place, like a real house, and an eagle and a dagger cut into the wall over it."

"Come away, child, come away; that's my lord's pew," said Jason Garfield, glancing apprehensively over his shoulder, as if expecting some chiding sexton or bell-ringer to appear.

"Is it a pew?" demanded audacious Rena, "and why is it so different from the others. Who is my lord? and——"

"Oh, sister, see!" chimed in little Alice, who stood before a beautiful mural tablet let into the wall half-way down the main body of the church, "two beautiful little angels clasped in each other's arms, and letters in white marble! Come and read!"

Jason Garfield stood leaning on his stick, his face singularly ghastly in the green light streaming down from a western oriel window, as Alice and Rena, standing hand in hand, slowly spelled out the inscription on the wall:

"To the memory of Allegra and Katherine, twin daughters of Adelbert, Earl of Glenhampton, who died June 21, 18—, aged two years and fifteen days. Suffer little children to come unto Me, and forbid them not, for of such is the Kingdom of Heaven!"

"Come away, children, come," he said, huskily; "the bell will be ringing for evening service, soon, and we must not be found vagabonding about here! Come, I say!"

"But, grandpapa!" pleaded Alice, "I want to look at the marble angels more! Did you know about Allegra and Katherine? What made 'em die? Who is Adelbert, Earl of Glenhampton? Tell me all about it, grandpapa!"

But Jason Garfield had hobbled out of the church. Rena reluctantly followed him, and Alice, who had no fancy to be left alone in the big, echoing building, even in the com-

panionship of the "little marble angels" ran lightly after.

"The cold floor feels so good to my feet," she said, piteously. "Rena, don't you think we might sit down here a minute on the green grass, where the water runs out of St. Hilda's Cup, and bathe my sore foot?"

"It's a church-yard," said Rena, somewhat doubtfully.

"But nobody would see us if we got behind the hedge. Please, Rena, it smarts so!"

And Rena, with a glance over her shoulder, to where her grandfather stood in front of the porch, leaning on his stick, and absently gazing off over the sun-gilded landscape, knelt down, and carefully removing the wretched mockery of shoes that scarcely covered her sister's poor little blistered feet, began to bathe them in the cool water, with a touch strangely gentle and skillful for one so young.

"Oh, that feels so nice," said Alice. "Do it more, sister. Let the drops fall down from your fingers!"

But little Alice's innocent enjoyment was not destined to continue long.

"Clear out here, you young wagabones!" shouted a gruff voice close to them, as a gate in the hedges was suddenly opened. "A-washin of your dirty feet under the very sancter-ary! I wonder you don't expect to be struck dead like Annermias and Saphiry! What'll you wagrants be a-doin' next? I'm a mind to have you afore a magistrate—I just have!"

"Please, sir!" faltered Rena, making a bold stand, while her more timid sister snatched up her shoes, and ran breathlessly toward Jason Garfield, "we warn't doing any harm!"

"Harm!" echoed the sexton, for such the bunch of keys he carried betokened him to be. "Harm, indeed! Get along with yourself, quick, or I'll know the reason why!"

"I beg your pardon, sir," said Garfield, advancing slowly; "but we were not intending to trespass; we only stopped a minute to rest, and we're goin' right on."

"Let me see you a-doin' of it, then," growled the irate sexton; and he stood watching them with Cerberus vigilance until they had got quite a distance down the road. "There's always such a lot o' tramps round the country in hop harvest," he muttered, as he disappeared within the church porch. "Nobody don't never know when they're safe and when they ain't."

"Grandpapa," said poor Alice, piteously, "I'm so tired! Aren't we almost there?"

"Yes," said Jason Garfield, slowly; "yes, we are almost home. Don't you see me coming nearer to the castle towers?"

"But that isn't home," sighed Alice.

"No; but don't you see the little cottage on the edge of the woods, where there's a wire fence?"

"With the chimneys painted blue?" eagerly demanded Rena.

"Yes, with the chimneys painted blue; that is home!"

He spoke in a tone of strange, subdued exaltation, and Alice's weary face grew brighter at his voice.

It seemed near, but it was a long walk to the tired pedestrians before they reached the outermost limits of the grounds of Glenhampton. Keeping in the footpath which led alongside of the ornamented wire fence, with its hedge of glossy-leaved rhododendrons beyond, and here and there a glimpse of close-shaven lawn, dotted over with huge trees apparently centuries old, they presently reached a little gate imbedded in the green wall of leaves.

"Grandpapa, it's locked," said Rena, in an accent of disappointment.

"They mostly used to keep it locked," said the old man; "but the key hangs just inside, where them as knows can find it. Yes, I thought so."

He had deftly passed his arm through an aperture in the wire-work, and reached a little iron key, with which he unlocked the gate and admitted himself and the two children.

Rena glanced up at the rustic little lodge, overgrown with a perfect wilderness of ivy, woodbine, and clematis; but the window shutters were closed, and there were no signs of life about the solitary door-stone.

"Grandpapa, what's that?" cried Alice, clinging closer to the old man, as some night-bird rustled through the gloomy foliage overhead.

"Nothing to hurt yer," said Jason, gazing dejectedly around. "Well, well, I hadn't no right to expect things to stand still durin' the years I've been away. She's dead, or she's moved away, an' I haven't the strength to go an inch farther."

He sank wearily down on the door-step, but the more

courageously hopeful Rena boldly lifted the latch and tried the door.

"Grandpapa, see!" she cried; "it comes open; it isn't locked. Let us go in!"

A gust of moldy-smelling air streamed out upon the soft twilight atmosphere of the outer world from the confined room, and Rena, straining her eyes into the darkness, could just discern the outlines of a few articles of furniture standing carelessly around, as if recently left by their possessors.

"I'll open the window shutters, grandpapa," she said. "See, there's an old bedstead, and you can lie down and rest until somebody comes."

"Until somebody comes!"

Jason Garfield, rising feebly to his feet, felt a vague, bitter consciousness that the guest who should soonest cross the threshold to meet him face to face would be Death!

"Aren't you coming, grandpapa?" pleaded little Alice, laying her soft cheek coaxingly against his hand.

"Yes, directly," he answered, slowly, as he glanced up at the purple sky where one or two stars were already beginning to shine through the amber glow of the west, for the sun had long been down and the air was full of dewy fragrance from glen, and copse, and fern-carpeted glade. "But there is something I must do first."

He drew a soiled and crumpled bit of paper from his breast-pocket as he spoke, and using the ledge of the outer window for a desk, hurriedly wrote a few words upon it with a lead pencil.

"Rena," he said to the elder child, who stood watching him with grave, dark eyes, "you are not so tired as Allie; will you take this note for me?"

"Where, grandpapa?"

"To Lady Glenhampton, at the castle. I can't leave you alone, my poor little ones, and if I could once see my lady——"

Alice came close to him, and looked up into his face with a startled glance.

"But you're not going to leave us, grandpapa? I won't let you go away from me—I'll follow you."

Jason Garfield groaned in spirit. How could he tell this innocent, loving little child, whose warm, clinging fingers closed so tightly round his chill hand whither he knew himself to be summoned? What did these babes know of death?

And how could he explain to them the inexplicable mystery?

"Rena—Rena," he said, "I can trust my own little woman to be quick and sure, and give it into my lady's own hand—just the note and nothing else.

"But where am I to go, grandpapa?" asked Rena."

"To the castle, child; just follow the road along, it's a good half mile and more, for all the towers look as if they were so near; and you must make good speed, or you'll maybe be too late."

Rena, accustomed to render implicit obedience, took the note, and thrusting it safely into the bosom of her frock, tripped away upon the mission that was so new and strange to her, while Jason Garfield, tottering into the dusky apartment, sank helplessly upon the scantily furnished little bed in the corner.

"Are you sick, grandpapa?" asked Alice, as she stood beside him, with a troubled face.

"I am tired, child, tired, that's all. Keep quiet a while and let me rest," he answered.

"But I may hold your hand?" pleaded the child. "It's dark, and the leaves rustle so, and I'm afraid."

He took her hand in his.

"Now sit still, Allie, and sister will soon be back."

Little Rena had set bravely forth, following the broad, graveled path which led from the wire gates, and wondering, as she walked, at the size and symmetry of the feathery elms and ancient walnut trees on either side.

"They must have been growing a hundred years," she thought; "and how smooth the grass is, and what a strange whispering sound the wind makes."

But presently she came to a road which diverged equally wide and stately to the left. She stopped puzzled.

"I don't know which way to go," she pondered; and then, as a low flying swallow darted to the left, she resolved to accept the omen and follow.

But as the shadows of the trees grew denser, and the purple darkness enwrapped the scene with an even heavier pall, and the far-off towers still eluded her view, Rena grew bewildered and confused. She had somehow wandered from the wide road into a narrow path, bordered on either side by shrubbery and bushes. Here and there, through an opening in the laurels and acacias, she caught a glimpse of

huge monsters, peacocks. bears, and human figures, cut in close-clipped box, the pride of the Glenhampton gardener's heart, but a hideous mystery to poor Rena; while the white gleam of statuary or vases made her think of ghosts, even though she knew what they were. But the greatest terror of all was something that skimmed past Rena with a rustling sound, and the light creaking of branches, while the sound of breathing made her poor little heart stand still.

"Oh! what is it? What is it?" she gasped, half aloud; for Rena, in her small experience of life, had never seen a pet deer before. And, with a sudden chill of terror congealing her blood, she sat down on the dewy grass, and began to cry bitterly, moaning the while:

"Oh, I'm lost in the woods! I'm lost in the woods! Oh, grandpapa! Oh, dear little Allie! I shall never, never see them again!"

CHAPTER II.

GLENHAMPTON CASTLE.

Glenhampton Castle, in the golden softness of the September starlight, was as stately and beautiful an edifice as the most critically architectural eye would wish to behold. Built of massive gray stone, with square towers on either side of the main building, the front was supported by Corinthian columns, with a turreted dome rising in the center to correspond with the smaller ones surmounting the side towers, and a broad flight of marble steps, crowned on either side by life-size groups, in marble statuary, approached from the lawn.

Within, the grand central hall, paved with a mosaic of antique marbles, was roofed with a dome of glass, nearly eight feet from the ground, seeming to rest on a circular row of black and gold Ionic columns.

Adelbert, Lord Glenhampton, the inheritor of this splendor, and the last male scion of a long line of Norman ancestry, was a gloomy and self-contained man, seldom seen in society, and rarely deigning to mingle in the gatherings of the neighborhood. He had married young, "for love," as people phrase it, the orphan daughter of a nearly extinct Middlesex family, and she had survived their marriage only a year. Her death, followed within a brief period by that of her twin daughters, had been a shock from which Lord Glenhampton had never recovered, although his present wife's beauty, talent, and ambition had vainly striven to rekindle the dormant flame of energy and aspiration. People whispered about the gloomy earl, as people always will whisper about those whose rank and station have raised them above the common herd; some called him "strange," others hinted at a taint of hereditary insanity, and yet others intimated that he was not happy in his second marriage. Yet all these reports were nothing more than the breath of idle rumor, and as such Lord Glenhampton never heeded them, even if, as was not at all probable, he ever heard them. Tall and fair, with blue eyes and brown hair, slightly blended with gray, even at the age of three-and-thirty, Lord Glenhampton was handsome and stately, in spite of a deep wrinkle below the brows, and a habit that he had contracted of stooping as he walked, like one whose

eyes are ever bent upon the ground. The old housekeeper at the castle declared that Lord Glenhampton had never "fairly looked up" since the death of his fair, young wife and her twin babies; and perhaps she was not far from right.

The present Countess of Glenhampton had been a young widow at the time of her elevation to the peerage, with one boy, two years old, and her only child by her present marriage was a little girl, now about seven, a dark-haired child, who bore the hereditary title of Lady Blanche Arden. Lady Glenhampton was brilliantly beautiful, with large, melting, oriental eyes, hair luxuriant, and purple black, and a skin of creamy whiteness; her daughter, child though she was, inherited her Jewess-like beauty, and little Ernest Evelyn, now about ten years old, bore the same type of dark brilliance.

She reclined in her drawing-room, this September evening, in a dress of gold colored satin, trimmed with draperies and festoons of white lace, and set off by the blaze of the rare oriental topazes which encircled her throat and flashed from her ears. Ernest Evelyn sat on the floor at her feet, with a book in his lap, pouring with a child's intentness over its pictured pages, and the little Lady Blanch was uttering childish shouts of delight as she bounded back and forth, joining iu the gambols of a pretty Italian grayhound, as white as milk, while Miss Clive, the children's governess, sat in the open window beyond.

Antonia Clive was scarcely on the footing of an ordinary governess at Glenhampton Castle. She had been the countess' most intimate friend when she was simple Mrs. Evelyn —she was still a favorite with the titled lady. Just twenty-eight years old, and in the full bloom and blush of her womanhood, Miss Clive presented a singular and exquisite foil to the dark beauty of Lady Glenhampton.

She was dazzlingly fair, with a complexion where roses and lilies were radiantly commingled, hair of so pale a shade of gold that, deprived of the warming touch of sunshine it became almost flaxen, and beryl-green eyes, deepening to the softest blue in moments of interest or excitement, while her features were of that pure Grecian outline one only sees in ancient pictures and statues. Like Lady Glenhampton, she was tall, but of reed-like slenderness, and it was always her preference to wear white dresses,

whose straight, soft folds fell classically around her, with only a flower or a ribbon in her hair. She needed no ornament to enhance her attractions, and she was perfectly aware of the fact.

Close beside Miss Clive, in truth, leaning over the back of the chair in which she sat, stood Arthur Hunsworth, the family lawyer of the Glenhamptons. For nearly a century, the legal business of the family at the castle had been transacted by the Hunsworths, grandfather, father, and son, and a cordial friendship had also existed during all these years between lawyers and clients, which the present Mr. Hunsworth was about to seal by a marriage with Lady Glenhampton's friend and governess, Antonia Clive.

Arthur Hunsworth was a fine-looking man of about thirty, with hazel eyes, clustering brown curls, and a pleasant square mouth, overshadowed by a dark mustache—a man whom any woman might think it no shame to love and trust implicitly—and Antonia Clive evidently gloried in the fact that she had won this noble heart and nature to be her own. You could read it in her soft eyes uplifted to her lover's face, in the rosy flush which stole over her face when he spoke to her, or allowed his eyes to rest lovingly upon her transparent brow.

"Day after to-morrow, Antonia!" he said, caressingly. "The time draws very near now."

"I wish it were sooner;" Miss Clive exclaimed, with a sudden impulse, as her fingers involuntarily closed over the hand which had taken hers, a willing captive.

"My darling—why?"

"I don't know, Arthur—I can't tell! Do you never experience sensations which you cannot account for in so many words?"

"Antonia always believed in omens and premonitions!" laughed Lady Glenhampton, lightly. "You will have to effect a radical cure, Mr. Hunsworth. Wait until you are a bride, Antonia, and then you will be the first to laugh at these idle fancies."

Little Lady Blanche had come up to her mother's side, and stood there, gravely listening.

"And I am to be Miss Clive's bridesmaid, mamma, am I not?" she asked, with eagerly shining eyes, "and hold her glove for her?"

"Yes, darling," answered Antonia, "and you are to pass

long days with me in the cottage under the beeches, you and Ernest, and mamma."

"It is all ready for us, Antonia," said Mr. Hunsworth, relieved to perceive that the momentary shadow had passed away from his *fiancee's* fair brow, "and I am going down to-night for the last look before it is consigned to old Smithson's care, until we return from our wedding trip to claim it. I have had the boudoir ceiling decorated in lilac and gold to suit your taste, and Lady Glenhampton has insisted on filling the conservatory from her own stock of plants."

"Because I know which flowers Antonia loves the best," said the countess. "I shall miss her sorely, Mr. Hunsworth; but you have the best right to her now, and it would be of little avail to keep Antonia here with Antonia's heart gone."

They talked idly on, now of one thing and now of another, and when Mr. Hunsworth finally took his leave Antonia Clive had forgotten her momentary depression and was light and gay as any sunbeam.

"You will not walk down to the cottage with me, Antonia?" he asked, holding her hand in his, with a lingering touch of tenderness.

"Not to-night; I have so many things to do," she answered, smiling. "You will be here early to-morrow morning?"

"As early as I can get away from red tape and parchment bundles."

She passed out on the marble-flagged terrace with him, and they parted in genuine lover-like fashion. And, as he went down the broad flight of flower-garlanded steps, he turned and waved his hand to her, gayly, in the dim starlight.

How little Antonia Clive dreamed that she should never look upon his living face again!

He walked hurriedly on through the dusky shadows of the park. The cottage which was being prepared for his bride's future home was some little distance from Glenhampton, and he wished to give it one last survey that night. Naturally enough his mind was full of pleasant thoughts and fancies, as he strode lightly along, little recking of the progress of time until he was suddenly startled

by a small brown form rising as if by magic out of the tall, tangled ferns at his feet.

"Halloo!" he ejaculated, stopping abruptly, "what's this? Is it pixy, elf, or brownie? Here, here, child, don't run; nobody is going to harm you! Who are you, and what on earth are you doing here?"

"I'm Rena!" sobbed the child, "and I'm lost!"

"Why, where do you belong?" demanded Mr. Hunsworth, more puzzled than ever.

"With grandfather. He's down there, pointing with one tiny, trembling finger; "but I can't find the place."

"What place is it?"

"It's a little house where nobody lives, down by the wire gate in the hedge."

"Oh, the deserted lodge! But what is your grandfather doing there? Does he know that he is trespassing upon private grounds?"

"He only came there to-night," faltered Rena. "Oh, please take me there. I'm lost!"

"Come, then," said the lawyer, marveling within himself. "Take hold of my hand, and we'll soon be there."

"Is it far?" piteously questioned the wearied child.

"Not very; half a mile or so."

Rena half ran, half hobbled by the side of her conductor, too thankful, to find herself going in the direction of her grandfather, even to think of the message he had intrusted to her hands. For she was but a child, and fright, weariness, and solitude had combined to unsettle her weary memory.

An oil lamp—part of the long disused furniture of the abandoned lodge—burned dimly on the table, as Rena led her guide up the two steps. Little Alice sprang from her place beside the bed.

"Oh, Rena," she cried, "I thought you never were coming back."

She stopped as she beheld a stranger with her little sister, and shrank slyly back.

But Arthur Hunsworth neither saw nor noticed her. His eyes were riveted on the bowed form which sat, its elbows supported on its knees, in a wooden chair, where the sickly yellow light of the lamp shone feebly on its wrinkled brow and scant, silvery hair. The strange footstep sounding on the threshold seemed to rouse the old man from something

which was neither dream nor syncope, but a commingling of both. He looked up, with wild, dilated eyes.

"Mr. Hunsworth?" broke gaspingly from his white lips.

Apparently Mr. Hunsworth was no less astonished at the encounter than the old man. He approached as if scarcely crediting the evidence of his own senses, and exclaimed, in low, thrilling accents:

"Jason Garfield! Is this you?"

CHAPTER III.

WHO WAS IT?

The starlight shining through the antique latticed panes of the lodge casements blanched a square upon the floor, where, resting on one pillow, their couch naught softer than the rude boards, the two sisters lay, twined in each other's arms, and sleeping the heavy, trance-like sleep of utter weariness, while around them lurked the awful shadows of death and danger, drawing nearer with every instant.

No eyes, save those of the tender, brooding stars above, and perchance now and then a startled deer or solitary fawn lifting its head from the dew-sprinkled grass, beheld the gliding motion of white draperies, the momentary gleam of locks of tawny gold, as a tall, slender figure hurried through the loneliest nooks of Glenhampton Park.

Was it a dream, or a vision, or the vapory mist-wreaths rising up from the glen assuming momentarily a shape akin to that of humanity? Little Rena, roused by what seemed to her the stealthy sound of footsteps, started in her slumbers, and half opened her eyes, to behold—a strange continuation of the troubled vagaries of her dreams!—a white face, with wild, glittering eyes, bent over her own, so close that the long, fair hair touched her cheek.

For one instant only, and then it was gone; and Rena, starting to her feet, shrieked aloud in the extremity of her childish terror:

"Grandpapa! grandpapa! Oh, wake, Allie, wake! I am so frightened! There's some one here close to us! Allie! grandpapa! wake!"

* * * * * * *

Nor were Rena's slumbers the only ones disturbed upon that eventful night.

The ordinary sleep of the Earl of Glenhampton was light, with long intervals of feverish wakefulness; but he had rested well and soundly beyond his usual wont, and was still sleeping in the dark hours preceding the dawn, when his valet sounded a noisy peal upon his chamber door.

"Wake, my lord!" he cried; "wake! Fire! the castle's a-fire!"

"Hold your tongue, Linley!" bawled the husky voice of the old steward. "It ain't no more a-fire than you be—no,

nor half so much. Where's the use of raising such a hue and cry, and rousing my lord out of his bed at this time o' night? I never see such a born fool as you be!"

But by this time Lord Glenhampton had thrown on a black velvet dressing-robe, and hastened to the door.

"What is it, Boylsford?" he demanded, addressing the steward. "Has anything happened?"

"There's a fire somewhere, my lord, sure enough," answered the old servant, deferentially, "as you'll see if you'll just please to look out of your west window; but there war'nt no need for disturbing you, nor you, my lady. I've sent Jennings down with the keys of the private engine-house, and the boat-house, and I was just goin' to step down myself, when——"

But Lord Glenhampton staid to hear nothing more before he drew back the silken draperies that vailed the windows looking westward.

Boylsford, the steward, was right. A fierce red light, now rising up into lurid tongues of flame, like the awful brightness that hangs over Vesuvius, now sinking down into rolling clouds of dusky redness, brooded over the tree-tops in the valley; and, as Lord Glenhampton turned, he saw the red radiance momentarily reflected in a pale, beautiful face at his side.

Lady Glenhampton stood there, her white cashmere wrapper thrown hurriedly round her, and secured by a heavy silken cord at the slender waist.

"You up, Edith!" he said, half-reproachfully. "Do you know that the night air is chill?"

"Oh, Adelbert!" she gasped, "what is it? Where can it be? Not in the hop-barns, I hope? Marienne told me there was a merry-making there late last night."

She caught at his arm, nervously clinging to him as she spoke.

"Be calm, my darling," he said, soothingly. "No, it is not in the direction of the hop-barns. It seems farther to the southward, and nearer to the park gates. There! do you hear the village bell ringing out? Edith ——" And he stopped abruptly, as a sudden updarting volume of flame revealed the outlines of surrounding objects more accurately. "I believe it is the deserted lodge at the west entrance!"

"Oh, Adelbert! but no one lives there."

"Fortunately not," he answered: "and, if it is nothing more than the old lodge, I shall not regret it very much; it has long been a blur on the beauty of the landscape, and nothing save the old associations connected with the place have prevented me from pulling it down."

"Yes, I know," said the countess, softly; "but, since those days——"

She stopped, checked by the gloom which seemed suddenly to enwrap her husband's face, and at the same moment Boylsford knocked once more at the door of the outer vestibule.

"My lord, pardon me for disturbing you again, but Parkins has just come up from the fire. It's the old lodge, my lord—burned to the ground!"

"Then there is no great harm done. But how did it take fire?"

"That's what I can't justly make out, my lord. Maybe 'twas them botherin' hop-pickers coming home late with their lighted pipes. Maybe 'twas a spark from old Gaffer Jones's kitchen chimbly; he's up early gettin' breakfast for the hop hands, and his cottage ain't no great distance from the lodge. Anyway, my lord, there ain't no reason for you to disturb yourself, and I'm only sorry Linley hadn't got wit enough to keep himself to himself, instead of goin' racketin' about the house."

And old Boylsford withdrew, muttering to himself as he went. Lord Glenhampton let the curtains fall once more.

"Go back to bed, Edith," he said to the countess, who stood beside him, shivering slightly in the raw morning chill.

"Presently," she answered. "I must go first to see that the children have not been disturbed."

"Call Marienne."

"As if any eye but the mother's could satisfy the mother's heart!" she answered, smiling, as she drew the cashmere robe closer about her queenly form, and vanished through the purple velvet draperies that concealed the arched door-way.

The nursery at Glenhampton Castle was separated from the apartments of the earl and countess by a corridor, and the rooms devoted to Miss Clive's occupancy. A single glance at the two rosewood couches, vailed in embroidered laces, told the countess that little Ernest and Blanche were

fast asleep. The door into the nurse's room adjoining was open, and Lieschen, the trustworthy German woman, who had been Blanche's attendant, ever since her birth, was also asleep.

Lady Glenhampton paused only to press her lips to Blanche's sleep-flushed cheek, and put the curls away from Ernest's fair, white forehead, ere she went to Miss Clive's room.

"Antonia," she breathed softly, opening the door as she perceived a line of light under it—"Antonia, are you awake?"

Antonia Clive was not only awake, but she was up, and straining her eyes from the window.

"Have they aroused you, dearest?" asked her friend, entering the room and passing her arm caressingly around the governess' waist.

"I heard the noise and the voices," Miss Clive answered, putting back her hair with a sort of bewildered look. "Oh, Edith. what is it?"

"Nothing that need make you look so pale, dear," Lady Glenhampton answered with a smile. "Don't you see the red right?"

"But I thought it was the dawn."

"Little simpleton," smiled the countess. "Don't you remember that you are looking toward the west. It is a fire!"

"A fire?" Antonia gasped; "where?"

"Lord Glenhampton conjectured at once that it was the deserted lodge at the lower end of the park, and it seems he was right. There is no harm done. No one lives there, and it will give the earl an opportunity to replace the unseemly old pile by a building which will be really picturesque. Now, go to sleep, love, or Mr. Hunsworth will be lamenting the loss of your roses, when he comes in the morning."

"But Edith"—and Miss Clive caught at the countess' robe, as if she would fain hinder her departure—"I—I have something to tell you. Edith, I am very wretched!"

With a mute motion she pointed to the white cambric robe on the sofa, the embroidered Persian silk slippers on the rug, wet and bedraggled, as if they had been dragged through dew and dust.

"I must have been sleep-walking, again, Edith," she wailed, holding her face in Lady Glenhampton's breast.

"Oh, Edith, I thought I had overcome that hideous habit! I have been in the park! Oh, I should have died outright of terror if I had wakened of a sudden and found myself there!"

"But what makes you think so?" eagerly questioned the countess.

"When I heard Boylsford's voice in the corridor, I sprang up and caught my dressing-robe. It was all wet with recent dews; my slippers, too, bore the marks of a long night walk."

She shuddered as the word's fell from her lips, but Lady Glenhampton soothed her with soft words and loving caresses.

"It is nothing, dearest," she murmured. "Lie down and rest. Your mind is so agitated just now, that your poor, overtasked body cannot but sympathize with it. Shall I get you a soothing draught?"

But Antonia refused aught in the shape of medicine, and Lady Glenhampton persisted in sitting beside her bed until a troubled slumber once more descended upon her heavy eyelids. Then she rose, and not daring to touch her lips to the fair, pale face, lest she should break the fragile charm of the uncertain sleep, lifted up a long yellow tress of Antonia Clive's hair, and pressed it to her rich, red mouth.

For these two women loved one another with an affection rendered all the more singular by the wide differences between their respective stations in life.

Long before Lady Glenhampton or her husband had left their apartments, the next morning, little Blanche's voice sounded merrily at Antonia's door.

"Miss Clive! Miss Clive! please will you come with Ernest and me to look at where the fire was last night? Lieschen has been down, and she says there's a lot of villagers there, and all the hop pickers on their way to their work, and the ruins are smoking yet!"

Heavy-eyed, and unrested by her brief slumbers, Antonia Clive obeyed the little girl's summons. and began a hurried toilet.

"Perhaps a walk in the fresh air will do me good," she thought. "At all events, it is worth the trial. Come, Blanche," she added aloud, as she tied on her simple straw hat, and took up the white parasol, which lay on a table

near by; and, with Blanche holding her hand, and Ernest running on before, she walked down the broad, graveled path leading to the western entrance of Glenhampton Park.

About half way to the gates, a gray-headed old man met them, walking very fast. Antonia recognized him as Martin Valpy, the bailiff of the Glenhampton estates.

"Good-morning, Mr. Valpy," she said, pleasantly; "I suppose you have been down to look at the fire? I was just taking the children there!"

Martin Valpy touched his hat.

"I beg your pardon, Miss Clive," he said, hesitatingly; "but—if I might make so bold as to advise, maybe you'd better turn back. It's no sight for a lady's eyes, let alone a little child's?"

"Why not?" Miss Clive asked, unconsciously.

He drew closer to her, lowering his voice as he did so.

"Why, miss, it seems there was somebody took refuge in the lodge last night unknown to us all, as was burned to death—an old man, miss, and two children!"

"Burned to death!" echoed Antonia, in accents of breathless horror, her face blanching as she listened.

"Yes, miss. Joseph, the under-gardener, he told me he was a-comin' by there late last night, and he seed a light there, so what does he do but plucks up a sperit, and goes in and there sees an old man with two little slips o' gals asleep on the floor! So Joseph he asks what it all means, and the man tells a pitiful tale about havin' no home, and startin' off early the next mornin'; and Joe, he was allers a soft-hearted creetur, Joe was—he not only let 'em stay, but he brings 'em a hunk o' bread and a mug o' beer out of his missus' cupboard. 'Lord!' he says, 'you should hev seen 'em eat!' And Joe he went over to Lingley to sleep, along o' bein' up early to get to work in Farmer Hawkins' hop-fields, and so it come as he has cnly just heerd where the fire was. They've been a pryin' up the beams, miss, and they've found sumthin' charred and crushed like human bones, an' scorched that horrible that——"

But Antonia's uplifted finger and deadly pale countenance warned him to desist in his catalogue of horrors.

"Hush! no more!" she gasped, rather than spoke.

"I beg your pardon, miss," he said. "I was a-goin' up to my lord, and I wouldn't no-ways have you come sudden on a scene like that!"

Touching his hat once more he departed, and Miss Clive called her little companions, who had been merrily chasing butterflies over the closely shorn grass, to her side.

"Children," she said, "Martin Valpy says we must not go to the fire. There is a crowd of people there, and your papa would not be pleased to have you go."

Blanche uttered an exclamation of disappointment. Ernest pouted his lower lip sullenly.

"I want to see the fire!" he exclaimed. "I *will* see the fire!"

"We can see it without going directly to the spot," said Miss Clive, in a conciliatory tone. "Don't you know, Erney, from the top of the little hills, where the marble temple stands, we can see all the place?"

"So we can," said Ernest, brightening up. "Come, Blanche, there's a short cut across the deer park, I know of, that will take us there in five minutes! I'll show you the way, Miss Clive."

"I know it already," said Antonia, smiling. "I have been there as often as you, Master Ernest!"

She led the way, exercise and excitement recalling to her cheek somewhat of the color which had been stolen therefrom by Martin Valpy's hideous tale, and her bright hair, escaped from its confining net, hanging in golden luxuriance down her back.

Putting aside the hazel bushes she entered the copse, calling Blanche to follow.

"*I'm* going through the deer park!" shouted Ernest, waving his straw hat in the air. "I'm too big to be afraid of the deer—and I'll bet a cravat I'm there the first!"

He dashed away in an opposite direction, while Antonia and Blanche kept on through the hazel copse until they reached an open space beyond, where Miss Clive suddenly paused. throwing up her arms above her head with a wild scream which echoed through the summer silence like a death-cry.

For there, stretched stiff and stark among the ferns and grasses, his pale face turned full toward her, and his half-closed eyes, glazed with the horrible film of death, lay the corpse of a murdered man—her affianced husband, Arthur Hunsworth!

CHAPTER IV.

A NEW FRIEND.

Contrary, however, to the universally received impression at Glenhampton Castle, and throughout the entire vicinity, the two little sisters had not perished in the devouring flames, which had made a fiery mausoleum for the bones of poor old Jason Garfield. The merciful hand of Heaven had averted from them a doom so sudden and so frightful, and to explain in what manner they escaped the agonizing death by fire, which seemed almost inevitable, we must go back to the moment in which Rena had been startled from the dead sleep of exhaustion by the touch of the yellow hair against her cheek, and the glitter of weird, watching eyes.

Alice, roused by her sister's reiterated cries, had started also to her feet, looking wildly around her, in the dim, uncertain starlight.

"What is it, Rena?" she questioned, grasping Rena's arm, and dizzy and bewildered from her slumber.

"Allie, didn't you see some one?" cried Rena, with chattering teeth. "Some one that rushed by you with long yellow hair and a white dress?"

"No!" whispered Alice, with a thrill of terror chilling the warm tide of her veins. "Rena, was it a ghost?"

"A ghost! No!" cried Rena, stamping her little foot on the floor. "There are no ghosts, Allie, and, if there were, this was not a ghost! It was a white woman—and I believe she meant to kill us!"

"Did she speak to you, Rena?" faltered Alice, pressing closely up against her more courageous sister.

"No, but her eyes looked so fierce and horrible," shuddered Rena. "Where is grandpapa? Let us go to grandpapa."

Hand in hand, the two children groped their way through the door-way of the adjoining room, to the bed, over which they had bent to give the old man their last good-night kisses.

"Grandpapa," cried Rena, and Alice's softer voice echoed the word; "Grandpapa, wake up. We are frightened, grandpapa!"

But there was no answer. Alice climbed up on the bed

and put her hand on the forehead she could but just discern in the faint glimmer of the casement. She drew it back with a sudden movement of dismay.

"How cold he is! And why doesn't he speak to me? Rena, Rena, I am afraid!" broke tremulously from her lips.

Rena felt his head, and uttered a wild, piteous wail!

"Oh, Allie, he is dead! Grandpapa is dead! He never will speak to you any more!"

With a child's untaught, instinctive terror of death, both of the little girls shrank away from the couch upon which rested the mortal remains of him who had at last put on immortality. In the same instant the rising wind fluttered the ivy trails at the casement, and an owl shrieked down the ruinous chimney with a mournful cry like that of the banshee.

"It is a ghost!" faltered Allie. "Rena, Re—na, let us run!"

Of ghostly visitants, Rena was not afraid, but she had a mortal horror of the reappearance of the human shadow she called the "White Woman," and flight appeared to be the only surety of avoiding it. She caught Alice's hand in hers, and the two lonely vision-haunted little creatures fled out into the starry darkness, crouching under hedges, pausing with palpitating hearts at every flutter of a leaf, or creaking of a wind-stirred bough.

Rena fully believed that she had taken the road leading to St. Hilda's Church, and the little village they had seen the day before; but in her agitation, combined with the darkness and her own uncertain ideas of the localities, she had kept on past the turning, and was several miles on a road leading away to the north-west; while little Alice, mutely obedient to her sister's guiding hand, and half asleep as she walked, or rather stumbled along, neither remonstrated or complained.

The one all-absorbing idea, which had taken possession of Rena's child-mind, was to escape away as far as possible from the dismal woods and darkness, and with blistered feet, torn garments, and delicate skin bleeding in more than one spot from the cruel spikes of wayside thorns and briers, the children plodded on, scarcely knowing that every footstep took them farther from the last clew which connected their past life and the future.

"Rena," pleaded poor little Alice at last, "please let me

sit down and rest! I can't walk another step; my feet ache so hard, and my head feels giddy!"

"Only a little ways farther, Allie," persuaded her sister. "I think we shall come to some houses soon."

"I can't, Rena."

And something in the piteous tone of her voice told Rena that the poor child was utterly exhausted.

She sat down in the grass, under the protecting shadow of an overhanging hedgerow, where the level rays of the early morning sun turned the dewy jeweling of the short grass to diamonds, and took Alice's head in her lap, with a protecting tenderness which was infinitely pathetic in one so young.

But Alice sat up again, clutching her sister's arm, with a face of terror.

"What is it, Allie?" questioned Rena.

"Some one's watching us from the other side of the hedge," whispered Alice. "I saw eyes looking at me through the bushes, and a woman's face."

Rena sprang to her feet, with an unshaped idea that the "White Woman" had followed them even thither; but the next moment a brown hand put aside the thick foliage, and a tall, lithe figure crept through the boughs and stood confronting them.

It was the figure of a woman considerably past middle life, yet erect and well-molded, with a bronzed face, small, black eyes, which roved hither and thither with a keen, restless light, and long, black hair, strewn with white, which hung down her back, over a weather-stained cloak of coarse red camlet. A calico handkerchief was tied over the top of her head, she wore the coarsest ef shoes on her feet, and her dress was of rusty black, scarcely reaching to her ankles. A spot in the grass, crushed and tumbled, showed where she had been lying, and a small, compactly tied bundle had evidently served for a pillow. Rena had not unfrequently seen such women before, and knew her at once for a wayside tramp—a pretended gipsy, who earned a precarious livelihood by telling fortunes, or begging from door to door of the hospitable farmers' houses.

"And who be you," she demanded, shrilly, "as comes racketin' along, frightenin' a honest woman out of a year's growth, just as she's had her down for a wink o' sleep? Who be you, and what lay are you on?"

"I don't know what you mean, ma'am," said Rena, timidly, and yet reassured by the sound of a human voice which, though sharp and high-pitched, was not unkindly in its tones. "We are Alice and Rena, and grandpapa is dead, and we are lost."

"Lost, eh?" said the woman. "Where do you live?"

"We lived in France once," answered Rena; "but we don't live anywhere now."

"Then it don't stand to natur' as you can be lost," the woman retorted, with a hoarse chuckle. 'Where's them as belongs to you?"

"Nobody belongs to us," innocently responded Rena, unconscious of the depth of utter desolation involved in her words; "there's only Alice and me since grandpapa died."

"Was you goin' to London?" abruptly interrogated the woman.

"No, ma'am, not that I know of. Is London far?" asked Rena, looking wonderingly up into the woman's face.

"A good bit!" the gipsy answered, with a backward motion of her head toward the north. "But law, it wouldn't be nothin' of a ways for them as has the pluck of you young kids! Ye're tired, ain't ye? and the little 'un's hurt her foot, as I live! Bide a bit—bide a bit!"

She drew a tattered piece of cotton cloth from her pocket as she spoke, and kneeling down beside Alice, bound up the sore, blood-stained feet, with a hand which if hard and brown was not ungentle.

"Doesn't that feel better?" she asked, straightening herself up again, aud placing both hands on her hips.

"Yes, ma'am, thank you," said Alice, while Rena's face mutely expressed her gratitude.

The woman, after eying both of them a minute, suddenly stooped and took Alice into her arms.

"The kid ain't no weight to speak of," she said, with a short laugh. "I'll carry her a bit of a ways, if so be as ye're goin' on to London."

"We are not going anywhere in particular," said Rena, hesitatingly. "If you would let us keep with you——"

"And welcome," the woman answered, almost eagerly. "London's a fine place for them as has their livin' to get. Nobody don't need to starve in London!"

"Do you think Allie and I could earn our living there?" asked Rena, who, child though she was, had been in danger

of sheer starvation often enough to be troubled by many a grim doubt on the bread-and-cheese question.

"Earn your livin'!" echoed the woman, as she strode along so rapidly that although she was burdened with the other child's weight Rena was forced almost to run to keep at her side. "Why, with your faces you'd ought to make your fortunes!"

"But how?"

"Stay along wi' me, and I'll show you how!" their strange guide answered. "There's ways and means enough for them as knows—plenty to eat and gay clothes to wear, and nothin' to do but to enjoy yourself."

"But your clothes are ragged and dirty," remonstrated straightforward Rena.

The woman broke into a laugh.

"D'ye 'spose I'm a born nateral to wear my best things on the tramp?" she asked. "Wait till ye see my silk gound at home, and the shawls I've got and the strings o' beads and ear-drops! And you shall have some of 'em if you're good girls!"

"Shall we?" said Rena, doubtfully. "Allie likes beads and gay things!"

"Don't you?"

"Not so much. Is she asleep?"

"Fast as a dormouse," the gipsy answered. "Poor thing! she must ha' been mortal tired! Did ye walk far?"

"I don't know how far," said Rena.

"What was the name of the place as ye comed from?"

Rena shook her head.

"There was a castle there," she said, "and a place called St. Hilda's Church!"

"I don't know of no such place!" the woman observed, after a moment or two of deliberation. "But it don't matter so much where ye comed from as it do where ye're goin' to? Be ye hungered? My inside's been cryin' 'cupboard!' this long while!"

"Yes," Rena answered, simply.

"D'ye see the chimney-stacks o' that 'ere farm-house?"

"Yes."

"That's where we'll get our breakfast," said the woman, inclining her head, and shifting the sleeping child a little lower on her arm.

Do you know the people?" questioned Rena.

"Never set eyes on 'em," was the brusque reply.

"Then how——" began Rena, in great perplexity, but the gipsy interrupted her with a good-humored laugh.

"Wait and see," she said, "and mind ye keep a close tongue in your head."

She advanced boldly up to the wicket-gate of a farm yard, where, through comfortable looking stacks of hay, and substantial barns and out-buildings, one could just catch, here and there, a glimpse of a low-eaved house, surmounted by lilac bushes and currant hedges.

"Whisht! whisht!" she said, "there's nothing to be afeard on," as Alice woke with a cry and start at the uproarious barking of two or three mongrel curs, who rushed tumultuously to the gate, at the sound of strange footsteps, thereby arousing the deep baying of a larger dog, or mastiff, chained to his kennel farther in.

"Hush, Tige! down Snap!" exclaimed a cheery voice, and a buxom girl, of sixteen or seventeen, came out of the eastern door. "Who's there, and what is it you want?"

"Naught on earth but the bit and the sup ye'll never miss, my bonny lady," the woman began, in insinuating accents; "a crust o' bread and a cup o' milk for the children."

The farmer's daughter, for such she was, looked compassionately upon the wearied little creatures.

"Are they yours?" she asked.

"That they be, miss," the woman answered, with smooth, ready falsehood; "and their father's been dead these two year, come next Michaelmas, and a hard row it is for a lone woman to be feedin' for both of 'em, for——"

"Wait a minute," said the girl, "and I'll bring you something, or, maybe you'd better come in the kitchen, and sit by the fire—the morning air is a bit chilly yet."

The woman, with a profusion of thanks. followed her young guide into a large, low-ceiled room, with a great, cheerful fire at one end of it, and the transverse beams, huge and smoke blackened, hung with hams, flitches of streaky bacon, and strings of onions, dried apples, and herbs. A single window at the south end, vailed with vine leaves, admitted zig-zag bars of sunshine, and a caged linnet was singing uproariously in the morning light.

"Oh, what a nice place!" whispered Alice. "I should like to stay here always; shouldn't you, Rena?"

The simple meal of fresh-baked brown bread and milk, with a red harvest apple for each of the children, was quickly disposed of, and the woman turned fawningly to the pretty girl, who had sat watching them eat, with a sort of innocent pleasure in seeing their hunger satisfied.

"My bonny lass," she said, "you let the old gipsy tell your fortin' now. There ain't a many can see the futur' as I can, and there's a black-eyed husband ain't far off, as——"

"Not black-eyed," interrupted the girl, laughing and blushing.

"Dark eyes, I'll go bail. Dark blue, maybe, but you have to look twice to see the color—and brown hair——!"

"And that's true," said the girl.

"Brown hair, and a face handsome enough for a king," smoothly went on the gipsy, "and he'd marry you to-morrow if——"

"Now, don't ye go to putting nonsense in the lassie's head," good-humoredly interrupted the farmer, a stout grizzle-headed man, who had come in with a pail in either hand. "They always do a harm enough of it, without no help. Clear out, I say. You've broke your fast and quenched your thirst, and there ain't nothin' you need to stay for now. Go about your work, Delly, child, that's the best way to get good husbands, if gals only knowed it."

It was not until the three paused at a wayside brook, two or three hours later, that Rena, to her astonishment, saw the gipsy woman stoop and dip up a draught of sparkling water with a little plated mug she had seen and admired on the farm-house dresser, as she had munched her crust of bread, that very morning.

"Where did you get that?" she asked, doubtfully, yet fearful of putting her vague fears into words.

"Where should I get it?" answered the woman, roughly. "Haven't I had it ever sin' I was knee high to a grasshopper?"

"You are not telling the truth!" said Rena, valiantly. "I saw it on the cupboard-shelves at the house where they gave us the bread and the milk."

The woman laughed, but her face was as black as a thunder cloud, nevertheless.

"You're a sharp 'un, I do declare," she said; "a reg'lar needle's-eye! Well, it was the same one, if you're so scrupulous about it."

"But how came it here?" persisted Rena.

"The young woman gave it to me."

"I did not see her."

"And she didn't mean you should. She didn't let her dad see, either. It was all because of the fine husband I promised her. Ain't that worth a cup, any day?"

Rena was not quite satisfied, but she had no reason to give for doubting any further. That the woman had stolen the mug, which had some value, she was certain, and she began to regret the rashness which had, as it were, given herself and her little sister up into the keeping and guidance of this unprincipled tramp.

But Rena was but a child of nine years old after all, and lived more in the present than in the future—moreover, she had a child's implicit trust that some way out of the troubled labyrinth would be provided. For the present she and Allie were quite in this woman's power, but she was kind to them, after her rough fashion, and a poor protector was many degrees better than no protector at all. So Rena cast off all care and suspicion, and reveled in the glorious sunshine of the September day, with the elasticity that belonged to her years and temperament. They were going to London, and to her London seemed a far-off fairy dream of splendor and luxury—a castle in the air, about to assume shape and reality.

They must have walked twelve or fifteen miles that day—along quiet roads, sometimes exchanging words and greetings with the hop-pickers, sometimes pausing to rest in sheltered nooks, when Alice slept, her head pillowed among wild flowers and perfumed ferns, and Rena frolicked about, enjoying the novelty and beauty of all that surrounded her. Toward evening a passing teamster gave them a "lift" of two or three miles in his empty cart, which was a great relief, and they slept in a barn.

"Ain't it nice, Allie?" cried Rena, clasping her little sister close in her arms. "Wouldn't you like to live so always?"

"But the winter would come, Rena," argued Alice, "and then it would be cold and dreary."

To Rena it seemed as if she had been asleep half the night; in reality it had been but an hour or so, when she waked, roused probably by the rustling of the hay, and saw to her surprise and terror that the gipsy woman had left her covert beside

them, and was stealing softly out, moving with panther-like precaution and stealthiness. Rena, scarcely daring to breathe, much less move, lay with dilated eyes, watching her.

"She is going off to leave us! she means to run away from us!" was her first thought, and she had started up with the idea of following, when she began to realize how foolish it was to apprehend any such imaginary change. The shawl and red cloak lay close by, their owner would probably return soon, and there certainly existed no sufficient motive for the gipsy thus abruptly deserting the little companions she had voluntarily adopted.

Yet, in spite of all these consoling reflections, Rena lay nervously watching and listening as the peaceful night wore on.

"I wonder where she can be going?" she thought. "I wonder why she didn't wake us up? Oh, if she shouldn't come back at all!"

The horror of this renewed anxiety was still torturing the poor little lonely waif, when the sound of low voices below relieved her in some degree—a man's deep tone, subdued to its least audible pitch, and the peculiar gruff accents of the pretended gipsy.

"I tell you," the former said, speaking as if in some irritation, "it wouldn't do—the beaks are on the scent."

"And you'll let me take all the danger! That's a pretty note, that is!"

"There ain't none—not for *you!* You've kept dark this six months, and there ain't nobody knows you are in the country. And then the kids——"

"Well, well!" interrupted the woman, "it's got to be as you says. Mind you're ready for me, that's all; it won't do to run no risks, or it may be a black night's work for more'n one of us!"

And Rena, who had listened eagerly to these uncomprehended words, could hear the soft tread of the stranger dying away on the grass, and the rustling movements of her protectress among the hay, as she seemed to be undoing and rearranging the bundles she had used for her pillows. She was yet busied in this occupation, when the child, wearied out by watching, and fatigued, fell fast asleep.

When she was roused, at the earliest dawn of morning, to resume their journey, she might almost have been tempted to believe the whole occurrence the troubled visions of slum-

ber, had it not been for the significant fact that the gipsy bundle had assumed larger proportions. Little Alice noticed it at once, with the quickness of perception natural to her.

"What have you put in your bundle, Mother Meg?" she asked, for by that name the woman had instructed the little girls to call her. "What makes it so big?"

"Only some clothes as a friend of mine axed me to call for on the way; don't be a meddlin'," sharply exclaimed the gipsy, as Alice was about to examine for herself. "She's awful particular, and she'd know if you so much as laid a finger on 'em. There, now, let's be off, for I've got to be in London by noon."

And in the excitement of these novel tidings the little girls forgot aught else.

CHAPTER V.

IN TROUBLE.

London, with its vast coronet of smoke and fog hanging over tower, and turret, and dreary wilderness of brick and mortar—London, with its scorching pavements, and vague hum of restless life and motion, and its far-reaching net-work of lanes, and alleys, and swarming streets. To the tourists who dashes through its more attractive suburbs in a cab drawn by a high-stepping horse, or enjoys it from the standpoint of wealth and aristocratic station, London may seem a pleasant place; but to foot-sore and wearied wretches like Rena and Alice, who drag their aching bones over the cruel pavements, bewildered by the noise, frightened by the strangeness, and uncertain what may become of them in the huge maelstrom of human life, it presents quite a different impression.

"Mother Meg, I am so tired!" said Alice, hanging heavily on Rena's hand. "Can't I sit down and rest a minute?"

But Mother Meg paid no attention to the child's entreaty. Since they had entered the suburbs of London her manner had altered to a degree that puzzled Alice sorely, while it alarmed her more observant sister.

"What made her drag us so suddenly into that dark court and keep us there so long?" whispered Alice; "and why does she dodge in and out of the side streets? I'm afraid of her, Rena."

"Hush!" Rena made answer, in the same subdued tones, as she watched Mother Meg exchange stealthy signals with a sallow-faced woman who was leaning out of a second-story window, her chin supported on both hands. The gipsy raised her eyebrows slightly, the woman, apparently absorbed in watching the antics of a withered little monkey, belonging to an Italian with a barrel-organ under her window, nodded her head with a scarcely perceptible motion.

"Do you know that woman, Mother Meg? Who is she?" asked Rena.

"What woman?" gruffly asked Meg.

"The one you nodded to just now."

"I didn't nod to nobody; I don't know nobody, and I just wish you'd mind your own business," sharply answered Meg. "There, take the bundle and carry it a ways. There ain't no reason you shouldn't do your share of the work."

She had stopped, and turned slightly pale under the brown sheath of sunburn that covered her face, apparently at no more sufficient cause than the fact that a crooked little Jew, the keeper of a second-hand clothing store, had come out to hang a red silk pocket-handkerchief on one of his show-hooks, shaking it out twice rather ostentatiously as he did so. She stood a moment hesitating. The Jew, apparently changing his mind, took the handkerchief down once more, and carried it in. This decided Mother Meg's line of tactics.

"Carry it like a child," she whispered, hurriedly re-arranging the heavy bundle which weighed down Rena's slender arms. "So—under your shawl; and if any one axes questions of you, tell 'em it's your little brother as has got the measles. Go straight on, and don't look to the right hand nor to the left."

And before Rena could fairly understand the directions hissed into her ear, Mother Meg had darted across to the other side of the street. and was strolling leisurely along, apparently absorbed in the gay prints and delaines displayed in the shop windows.

A minute afterward, Rena, who had kept mechanically on, found herself face to face with a burly policemen, who had come unexpectedly around the corner.

"Why don't you look where you're a-goin'?" demanded this apparition in a voice of an aggrieved personage. "Stop a bit—not quite so fast. What's that you have there?"

"It's—it's my little brother," faltered Rena; "he's got the measles, and——"

But the policemen, evidently regarding the two dusty little girls as suspicious-looking characters, took the bundle away from her without further ceremony.

"He's heavy for a child of his age," he observed, satirically. "Considerable broke out, too, with the rash. I don't think it's quite safe for him to be out without the family physician's advice. Let's have a look at him. Whew-w-w! Well, you are an innocent appearin' one for such a plant as this ere! Where's the rest of you?"

Rena shrank from the iron grasp of his hand upon her

arm, while Alice burst into clamorous weeping.

"Mother Meg gave it to me," she answered, very pale, but firm, with her dilated eyes fixed full upon his face.

"Your mother?"

"No!" Rena answered, with a flush of wounded pride upon her forehead. "We found her yesterday under a hedge."

"Where is she?"

"She went across the street," Rena made reply, looking around with a bewildered glance. "I don't see her now."

"And you won't see her—not at present," the policeman said. "That's all right! so come along! I'll never complain o' bad luck again. To think I should ha' stumbled right on the reward arter all, and we clear of the track of it, as one might suppose! Come on, I say," he added, giving the child's arm a little jerk. "There ain't no use a-hangin' back."

"Where are you taking me to?" asked Rena, wildly. "Hush, Allie! don't cry so!"

"That's a pretty question to ask," answered the policeman. "Why, to the station 'us, to be sure—did ye s'pose I'm a-takin' of ye to Buckin'am Pallis?"

Now, the two little girls, after threading a labyrinth of narrow, crowded streets, and walking until they could scarcely drag one foot after the other, found themselves locked into a square cell—for it was hardly large enough to deserve the name of room—with whitewashed walls, a grated window close to the ceiling, an iron bedstead, and a wooden bench and table, by way of furniture.

"They'll bring you some'at to eat, presently," said the man with the keys, into whose hands their captor had intrusted the poor fugitives. "You needn't fret, neither, for nobody ain't a-goin' to hurt ye."

And the clang of the door behind them echoed his words.

"Rena! Rena!" whispered Alice, looking around her, with a white cheek and fluttering heart, "where are we? Is this a jail?"

"No," said Rena, affecting a courage she did not feel, "it's only a station-house. Didn't you hear the man say so?"

"But we are locked in—and don't you see the bars at the window?"

"But we haven't done anything wrong!" persisted Rena, "and how can they put us in a jail?"

Poor little innocent Rena—had she been a few years older and wiser, she might have expressed the simple tenets of her faith in the grand words of the English poet:

> "Stone walls do not a prison make
> Nor iron bars a cage!"

It would have been no inappropriate sentiment, for the child's simple confidence was unshaken in the ultimate triumph of the right.

"What will they do to us, Rena?" asked Alice, the color coming and going on her cheeks as she nestled close up to her sister.

"I don't know, Allie."

"Will they take you away from me?"

"They shall not!" exclaimed Rena, with flashing eyes. "I won't let them!"

And Alice, somewhat encouraged by this boldly uttered assertion, twined her fingers in those of her sister.

"It's because you told a lie, Rena," she said, gravely. "You said Mother Meg's bundle was your little brother."

"She told me to," said puzzled Rena.

"All the same, it was a lie," persisted Alice. "I don't think Mother Meg was a good woman, Rena. She told wicked lies—and she stole that cup, I know."

"But she was kind to us, Allie."

"Yes, she was kind to us, but that don't make her good. I don't think grandpapa would have liked her, Rena."

Rena sat silent—the great puzzle of existence was too much for her small mind to solve as yet.

"Oh, Allie!" she broke forth, at length, "don't it seem a year since grandpapa died! I am so miserable, Allie, but I can't cry like you do."

Alice drew her little hands caressingly over her sister's face.

"But I don't understand it all," she said. "We haven't done anything, Rena, you and I, but we are here locked up. Let's make 'em let us out."

Rena shook her head; she saw the difficulties in the way of their liberation more fully than her little sister saw them.

They are coming back," said Alice. "Rena! Rena! remember you said they shouldn't take you away from me!"

"Don't be afraid!" said Rena, encouragingly, and she took both Alice's hands firmly in hers as the keys grated harshly in the lock without.

But they might have spared themselves their fears for the present at least—it was only a surly looking official, with hair cut so closely to his head that it looked like bristles, who carried tin bowls of very sky-blue milk with a tin plate of crackers.

"Dinner," was his gruff remark. "And be quick about it—you comes on as soon as his worship sets."

"What does he mean, Rena?" whispered Alice, greedily beginning to eat her bread and milk, for she was nearly famished.

But Rena could not tell her, and the bristly-haired man, making his appearance soon after, summoned them to follow him.

"Court's up," said he, "and it won't do to keep his worship waitin'. Come!"

"Who's his worship?" timidly asked Rena, rising to obey. The man stared at her with dull, fishy eyes of surprise.

"Don't ye know?" he asked. "Why, he's Sir John!"

And before Rena could ask any more questions she was led down a long corridor to a large, light apartment, wainscoted around in polished oak, with a rail extending around three sides, behind which sat a portly old gentleman, in gold spectacles, half a dozen others, and two clerks writing busily at a desk. A crowd of people, of all ages and sexes, were gathered around the door opposite, apparently attracted thither by no stronger motive than idle curiosity, and in a sort of railed-in box at the left Rena and Alice started to see Mother Meg herself, in the identical red camlet cloak with two policemen behind her.

"These are the children, eh?" said the gold-spectacled old gentleman, looking up, as the policeman who had made the arrest stepped forward and took Rena's hand from that of the bristle-headed official.

"Yes, your worship, them is the children. This 'ere wit the black eyes was the one as had the bundle."

The old gentleman looked kindly at the two little girls as they were placed in a box corresponding to that occupied by Mother Meg.

Rena thought, as her timid eyes met his glance, that she

should not be afraid to talk to him if he were to ask her any questions.

"They are very young," said he, compassionately.

"Young in years, but old in wickedness—we see too many cases of that here, Sir John," said a tall, fair-haired man, leaning against the table.

"What is your name, my dear," said Sir John Lavely, the magistrate, as Rena stood looking at him, her chin just on a level with the top of the box.

"Rena Mordaunt."

"Serena?"

"No, sir, Rena—nothing else."

"And your sister's? She *is* your sister, I suppose?"

"Alice, sir."

"Just what I told your honor," eagerly put in Mother Meg. "Rena an' Alice—the only grandchildren I've got left in my old age, and them as innocent as the new-born babe."

"We are not her grandchildren!" flashed out Rena, wrathfully. "We never saw her until yesterday."

"Accounts disagree," said Sir John, dryly.

"Don't pay no heed to nothin' they says, my lord, your honor," cried Mother Meg; "they're little liars, an' always was, to disown their poor old grandmother as has worked her fingers to the bone for 'em. I never see such wampires in all my day."

"How is it, little one," said the magistrate, suddenly directing his gaze at Alice; "is she your grandmother?"

"No, sir," Alice answered, simply.

Mother Meg burst into a torrent of angry exclamations and abusive epithets.

"Officer," said Sir John, "take that woman out, since she cannot conduct herself properly in the presence of the court. Now, then," as the bustle attendant upon Mother Meg's removal was hushed into silence, "we will proceed with the examination. Rena," with an encouraging nod to the small witness, "tell me as plainly as you can how you first met this woman."

And Rena accordingly told her simple tale, with which Alice's, who was separately examined, entirely coincided.

"This is a strange story," said good old Sir John, "and I can't make either head or tale of it. The old woman lies

like a trooper, that's plain enough, but I'm inclined to think these little girls have been mere tools in her hands."

"My dear Sir John," exclaimed the fair-haired gentleman, pressing the five fingers of his right hand lightly against the five fingers of his left.

"Why, what's *your* opinion, then?" said the magistrate, suddenly wheeling round his chair and looking the other full in the face.

"That they are very artful, and have told an exceedingly plausible story.

"Pshaw!" said Sir John. "You haven't a bit of faith in anything, Nickham."

"Not in many things, Sir John," said Mr. Nickham, as if he considered it rather a laudable characteristic. "But just look at the impossibility of the thing, my good sir. Here is the Hereford silver, with the family crest and monogram still on it——"

"Because we happened to lay hold of it through superior good fortune before, instead of after it had found its way to the melting-pot," interrupted the magistrate.

"Exactly so—the Hereford silver carried by two little girls—mere babies to look at. Now, do you suppose if they hadn't been old hands this Margery Meiklebren would ever have trusted to them in this sort of way? Do you suppose this girl would have lain still in a barn under such suspicious circumstances as she details? Not a bit of it. Wouldn't it have been natural to rouse the neighbors—to give the alarm? No, no; depend upon it she's in the very thick of it, with all her innocent looks, and the other's just as bad. Why, the very smooth, straightforward story she tells is enough to convince *me*. An innocent child would be frightened out of her senses in a place like this. This one is as composed as if she were in her own home. Depend upon it, Sir John, she's an old hand."

"She never has been here before," interposed Sir John Lavely, wrinkling up his brows in an acute angle of perplexity.

"All the more credit to her duplicity. I've no doubt she has richly deserved it a score of times."

But here Rena herself most unexpectedly broke into the conversation.

"You are telling wicked, *wicked* lies!" she burst out; "and it isn't true, and I hate you!"

"Little girl—little girl!" interposed Sir John's warning voice, "that is not the way to talk to Mr. Nickham."

"He called me a thief," panted Rena, squeezing Alice's hand so vehemently in her excitement that the little thing winced with the pain. "I am not a thief!"

"You must allow us to be the judges of that, if you please," said Sir John, dryly. "Officer, remove the prisoners!"

"Are we going to jail?" wailed Alice. "Oh, Rena! Rena! you must not leave me!"

"I won't!" said Rena, resolutely, throwing her arms around her sister's neck, and looking with defiant eyes at Sir John's amused countenance. "I'll never leave you, Allie!"

"And you need not," said Sir John, kindly. "Don't separate them, officer—they are mere sparrows at best, and I don't believe they are criminal, notwithstanding your arguments, Nickham!"

And the little girls were led out of court by the policeman, whose treatment of them was evidently much modified by "his lordship's plainly expressed opinions.

CHAPTER VI.

THE CORONER'S INQUEST.

The scene of horror and confusion at Glenhampton Castle can easier be imagined than described, upon that eventful September morning, which dawned so radiantly over the charred and smoldering ruins of the ill-fated lodge, and sprinkled its baptismal chrism of dew-drops on Arthur Hunsworth's dead face, in the tangled fern glade below the deer park.

Lady Glenhampton had just entered the breakfast-room, looking slightly pale, from want of sleep on the preceding night, yet exquisitely lovely.

She was moving in her slow, graceful way across the room to a window which commanded a glimpse of a beautiful ornamental lake, now dotted with white swans, which were Ernest Evelyn's especial favorites, when the door opposite was thrown open, and Mrs. Wadesleigh, the housekeeper, rushed in, with uplifted hands, and a face of unspeakable terror.

"Oh, my lady! my lady!" she gasped, "they said I was to prepare you, but——"

Lady Glenhampton grew ghastly pale, pressing her hand to her left side, as she advanced a pace or two, holding to the mullion of the window for support.

"The children!" broke from her white lips. "Oh, what has happened to them? For the sake of Heaven, do not keep me longer in suspense!"

"They're safe, my lady, bless their dear little hearts—it isn't them at all," answered Mrs. Wadesleigh; "but, oh, my lady, poor, dear Miss Clive, she as was to have been married to-morrow——"

"Tell me, Wadesleigh," passionately burst forth Lady Glenhampton, "is she ill? is she—dead?"

"It's Mr. Hunsworth, my lady—he's been found murdered in the glen just beyond the deer park, and Miss Clive was the one as found him."

"Where is she?" Lady Glenhampton's face was whiter

than the wall, as she stood there. "How did it happen? Whose hand did the deed? Quick! Tell me more!"

It was not necessary, for, through the half-open door of the breakfast-room, her startled eyes could see the dead weight laid upon a shutter, and covered with sheets, carried into the softly carpeted corridor, which led into the south garden, and Miss Clive's insensible figure borne after; and before Mrs. Wadesleigh could interfere, the countess had rushed past her, and was holding Antonia's white face to her bosom.

"Oh, my poor, poor darling!" she murmured, "my wounded dove, it were better to have stricken you dead at once! Antonia! Antonia! speak to me! Oh, blessed Heaven!" with a despairing thrill of anguish in her tone, "she does not know me!"

"And it's a great blessing, my lady, that she doesn't," Mrs. Wadesleigh interposed. "The worst of it will be when she comes to again. And now, my lady, don't think I'm making too bold, but take an old servant's advice, and go back to your room; this is no sight for such as you, and the earl will say so, too, when he comes."

Lady Glenhampton turned to the head gamekeeper, who was directing the men where to lay their ghastly burden.

"Have you told him?" she asked, almost inaudibly.

"My lord met us at the lower gate, my lady," the man answered, and Lady Glenhampton allowed herself to be led back into the breakfast-room.

Meanwhile Lord Glenhampton had paused to speak with Martin Valpy, the bailiff, who had imparted to him the conjecture, magnified into fact by the mute witnesses which had been already exhumed from the ruins of the fire, that human life had been sacrificed in the fall of the old lodge walls!

The earl listened in silence, with folded arms and drooping head, the greenish shade of pallor, which crept over his features being the only index to his feelings. He stood motionless a moment or two, after Martin had finished his tale, and then only broke the silence by saying:

"The hand of Fate!—ay, neither more nor less than the hand of Fate! There is a blight hanging over this ill-omened spot—an evil cloud, which thrives on blood only! Nothing but ruin and desolation ever came near this fated house. My best friend lies murdered almost within the shadow of

my roof-tree; the girl, who is like an inmate of my home, is a widowed bride; nay, the very stranger, who seeks with his little ones, a night's rest within the proscribed walls of Glenhampton, dies an awful death, as if the elements themselves were in conspiracy against us! When—when will it all end?"

Martin Valpy listened in respectful silence. It was quite evident that Lord Glenhampton was unaware that his troubled thoughts had taken voice and sound.

"My lord!" he said, at length, "I took the liberty to order the—the remains to be taken to the steward's house, and when the inquest is held at the castle——"

"Yes, you were quite right, Martin," Lord Glenhampton said, hurriedly. "Poor wretches! why did not instinct bid them go elsewhere for so poor a boon as a night's shelter?"

And he turned abruptly, and went into the long avenue leading to the rose gardens.

Old Martin looked after him, with a mournful shake of the head.

"He's a broken man," muttered the bailiff, twisting a branch of larch round and round his mechanically busy finger. "And I can remember him such a bonny lad, with eyes that laughed out at you whenever he spoke, and feet that fairly danced over the green turf instead of walking. Well, well, we must all change; but it somehow seems harder when the heaviness and grief come before their time. No one fails to grieve when the old tree is cut down; but when the lightning blasts the stately young pine, one can't choose but wonder at the ways of Providence.

Lord Glenhampton kept on his way the while, alike unconscious of and indifferent to the criticisms or opinions of those who surrounded him, and entered the castle by a side-door at the north entrance. A servant sat dozing in an arm-chair by the hall table. He started as the earl's footsteps crossed the threshold."

"Where have they put *it?*" Lord Glenhampton asked, briefly.

"In the big room at the foot of the east tower, my lord," the man answered.

"Why did they choose *that* room?" the earl questioned, half as if he were speaking to himself.

"It was Boylsford's orders, my lord," said the man; "he

said it was separate like from the rest of the house, an' wouldn't be like to annoy the family so much."

But Lord Glenhampton passed on, without seeming to hear the last words.

Toward one or two o'clock several of the gentlemen of the neigborhood, some of whom had never entered the precincts of Glenhampton before, assembled in one of the gloomy Gothic parlors opening from the main room of the eastern tower, for the purpose of holding the "inquests," while, side by side, upon a long table in the echoing and unfurnished apartment beyond, lay the corpse of Arthur Hunsworth and the few ghastly relics which had been brought up from the scene of the fire.

With reference to these last but little information could be gained, and a verdict of accidental death, by fire, was rendered.

The chief witness in the case of Mr. Arthur Hunsworth was the unfortunate man's clerk, Theodore Poynings. He was a handsome, smooth-spoken young man of six or seven-and-twenty, with very white teeth, a gentle voice, and dark eyes that would have been very handsome had it not been for a sinister cast in one of them, almost imperceptible at times, but becoming faintly prominent when he was a little annoyed or excited. Mr. Poynings gave his evidence in a straightforward manner, merely detailing the habits of the murdered man, and the fact that he had visited his office on the night of the murder at about eight o'clock, when the witness noticed that he appeared flushed and excited.

Other witnesses were examined, but nothing material was elicited further than that the fatal blow must have been struck from behind with a sharp instrument like a dagger, and that the assassin was probably well acquainted with the anatomy of the human frame.

Miss Clive was present at the inquest, and listened to the proceedings with an interest which did not permit her to lose a word of the evidence.

The motive for the deed remained as totally obscure as ever. It could scarcely have been for greed of lucre, for Mr. Hunsworth's expensive gold watch, with its heavily wrought chain, and his pocket-book, containing both money and valuable papers, were untouched, as well as the rings, pins, and sleeve-buttons he wore, all of no inconsiderable value in their way.

The verdict was what might naturally have been looked for—that Arthur Armsby Hunsworth had come to his death at the hand of some person or persons unknown.

In the silence that followed the slowly enunciated words, Miss Clive rose to her feet and spoke in a low, passion-chilled voice.

"And is this all that you have to say? Do you mean to tell me, gentlemen, that you will let a human creature be foully murdered in your midst and raise no finger to detect his destroyer or avenge his death? Are you men, with pitying hearts in your bosoms, or are you stocks and stones? He was your *friend*—he moved in your midst but yesterday, the strongest and noblest of you all—will you let him lie unheeded in his bloody grave? Is human life of so little account in your eyes as this? and such a life as *his*? Oh, were *I* but a man, the deepest depth of the sea should not hide his murderer—the most obscure cavern of the mountains should afford no shelter for him. The mark of Cain is on his brow—sooner or later it will be divulged to our watching eyes. Is Arthur Hunsworth to be forgotten *thus?*"

"My dear young lady," began Mr. Pangloss, one of the jurors, "if it were possible——"

"Possible—possible!" she echoed, mockingly. "I tell you all things are possible to those who have will, and courage, and purpose. He *shall* be avenged! I swear it here with my right hand lifted to Heaven, I will trace out his murderer, and *my* hand shall deal the bolt of vengeance, since you are all so lax and cowardly. Let him flee whither he will, he shall not escape *me*—I will follow him, even were it to the gates of the grave. I will follow him and be avenged! My life shall be a sacrifice on the altar of his dear memory. I renounce all else. I cast off all other restraining ties. Before Heaven I swear it!"

Her voice, low and intense, had fallen almost to a whisper—her eyes blazed as if with some hidden fire—and she would have fallen if Lady Glenhampton had not caught her in her arms.

There were two funerals from St. Hilda's Church the next night—Mr. Hunsworth's, followed by hosts of friends, all mourning over his sudden death, and lost in conjecture as to whose hand had struck the fatal blow, and that of a few charred remains without name or regret.

But, drearier and more desolate than any coffin's corpse

was Antonia Clive, sitting all alone in the room where lay her bridal robe with the cloud-like vail and wreath of orange flowers, and such a look in her white, set face as made Lady Glenhampton shudder as she saw it.

Alone—and revenge! Those were the two vague threads of consciousness that filled her whole existence now.

CHAPTER VII.

WYKENHAM REFUGE.

Rena and Alice Mordaunt had been sitting in the dreary anteroom of the London police-court somewhat more than an hour, although the time appeared infinitely longer to them, when they were once more summoned into Sir John Lavely's presence.

"Well, my little girls," said the magistrate, kindly, "I have concluded to send you——"

"Not to prison, sir!" gasped Rena, as he paused an instant, and Alice fixed her blue eyes eagerly on the wrinkled face.

"No, not to prison—because I really don't think you have wittingly done anything to deserve such a fate as that—but to the Wykenham Refuge."

"What's that, sir?" asked Rena, innocently.

"Well, it's a place that is provided for just such as you—homeless little girls, my dear. You'll be well provided and cared for, and I know a kind lady who will keep her eye on you. Shall you like that?"

"I'd rather go away, sir," said Rena, frankly.

"I dare say," said Sir John, rubbing his nose and smiling; "but that isn't advisable under the circumstances."

"Alice must go too."

"Yes, Alice shall go too," nodded Sir John, kindly. "We won't have you separated—at present at least."

He spoke a word or two to an attendant, in a low voice, patted the children's heads, and bade them "good-by and good-speed," and presently they found themselves in a curious sort of vehicle, curtained all around, and totally destitute of springs, jolting along the London streets.

The Wykenham Refuge for Homeless and Destitute Girls was a huge, red brick building, sprinkled irregularly with shutterless windows, which seemed to wink like innumerable eyes in the level sunshine, and situated in one of the least inviting of the suburbs of London. Of foliage or shrubbery there was absolutely none—the very grass, where

it was not trodden out in arid patches of clayey soil, was burned and yellow, and the high wall of gray stone that surrounded the building was devoid of vine, creeper, or aught that might tend to soften the stern angularity of its shape.

"I don't like this house," whispered Alice, clinging to Rena's hand. "Let us go away from here, sister. It seems as if I couldn't breathe in this place.

But the appearance of the matron, a plump, good-natured little woman in black, who kissed the children, and cuddled them close up to her, in a motherly sort of way, reconciled Alice to the high wall and dreary yard.

"Poor little things," said Mrs. Mar, glancing over the note which was handed in with the new comers. "Alice and Rena, eh! Sisters—yes, so I supposed; there's a sort of a family likeness about the nose and mouth. Sir John sends 'em, does he! Well, Sir John's a kind gentleman as ever lived. Come on, my dears, come in and see the other little girls."

"Are there many here, ma'am?" asked Rena, timidly.

"Only three and thirty just now, but we generally have more at this season."

She opened the door into a large, low-ceiled room, with windows opening on the yard, where a number of sickly looking little girls were sitting, standing or running around. At the click of the door-latch they all stopped in their respective occupations and stared at the new-comers.

"This is the play-room," said Mrs. Mar. "Run along, dears, and get acquainted."

She shut the door again and disappeared, as if taking it for granted that assimilation would be an easy task to the little strangers. But the girls all stood and gazed steadfastly, circling round Alice and Rena, as a company of barnyard fowls might stand and stare at a pair of curious foreign birds suddenly introduced into their domains. Rena returned the gaze with interest, but Alice, more timid and less self-sustained, burst into tears.

"What's she a-cryin' for?" demanded a tall, awkward girl of thirteen, touching Alice, as if half doubtful whether she were not made of sugar or glass.

"None of your business," answered Rena, succinctly. "Let her alone."

"I ain't a touching of her," was the sulky response. "A big cry-baby! *I'd* be ashamed!"

A derisive laugh rose up among the girls. Rena looked round at them with flashing eyes.

"*I'd* be ashamed to laugh at strange girls," she said, with an indignant choking in her voice. "You're a mean, hateful lot, and I won't speak to any of you."

One of the most mischievously inclined of the crowd caught hold of a fluttering remnant of Rena's torn frock, just as she uttered this defiance and jerked it away.

"No," said she, with a giggle. "Dear me, girls, Miss Rag-bag-and-bobtail won't speak to none on us! Ain't it a pity."

Rena faced short round on her tormentress, and made a snatch at the captured stream of faded calico.

"Give it to me," she sputtered wrathfully. "It's mine."

The girl made a clumsy effort to evade her grasp, and in doing so fell against Alice, and nearly overthrew her. Alice cried right away, and Rena, more incensed by far on her sister's behalf than she had been on her own, flew at the tall girl, and grappled with her furiously.

"Mur-r-der," squeaked the appalled victim, "mur-r-der! She's a killen' of me! I'm a-bein' strangled!"

And Mrs. Mar, opening the door at the same moment, stood in astonishment and displeasure, while a dozen shrill voices piped up, in answer to her stern "What is the meaning of this?"

"Please, ma'am, Mary Ann Jones wasn't a doin' nothin', and she just flewed at her an' most choked her to death."

Poor Rena! the first impression she succeeded in making had been far from a favorable one.

"It's a lie!" she cried, with more emphasis than elegance of expression. "She tore my frock and knocked Alice over, and—and I hate her, so I do."

A dispassionate cross-examination of the small witnesses who had beheld the origin of the affray, convinced Mrs. Mar that the elfish looking new-comer had been more sinned against than sinning, and the two little girls were taken to the matron's own room to have some supper, a bath, and an assignment of new clothing in place of the wretched rags they wore.

"I don't want this old gray frock," said Alice, distrustfully eying the respectable 'uniform gown' laid out for

her. "I want a white dress with blue ribbons, and bronze boots like the little girls I saw in the street."

"My dear," said Mrs. Mar, remonstratingly, "white dresses and blue ribbons are only for rich little girls."

"I want to be a rich little girl," said Alice, piteously, while Rena skipped about in her new garb, delighted with its comfortable and decent cleanliness. Mrs. Mar looked at her, as she stood there, smiling and flushed from her recent bath, the dark hair curling in damp rings away from her brow, and her eyes shining like wells of dark water, and could not but acknowledge to herself that she was very pretty, for a "homeless waif."

"I'm glad you happened to be here before 'visiting day,'" she said, half speaking to herself; "the girls we've got just now are such a plain-looking set, and Mrs. Heneage likes pretty girls."

"What is visiting day?" asked Rena. "And who is Mrs. Heneage?"

"It's the day the lady patronesses come around, my dear," said Mrs. Mar. "I wonder if your hair wouldn't curl, to twist it round your finger, after it's been wet; and the Honorable Mrs. Heneage is Lord Barrowfield's sister, the lady that does the most for us. Dear heart, Allie, how you are yawning. Well, well, I suppose you're tired and want to go to bed."

"Where is our room, ma'am?" asked Alice, stifling a second groan.

"Room!" echoed Mrs. Mar. "Why, what is the child talking about? You don't have a room. Ask Eliza, the dormitory girl, to put you in No. 89. There, run along, children; I've got my accounts to make up yet to-night."

Nos. 89 and 90 were tiny little white beds, each with a chair beside it, which was all the privacy "homeless girls" were expected either to desire or to deserve.

"Can't I get in Rena's bed?" asked Alice, looking wistfully at her sister's pillow.

"No, certainly not!" said Eliza, sharply. "One to a bed —that's the dormitory rule!"

And although Alice sobbed herself to sleep, both the children slept well and soundly in the small beds, scarcely wider than a plank, which were allotted to them, and waked up in some degree reconciled to their new life.

This especial Saturday happened to be a red-letter day at

the Wykenham Refuge, the visiting day for the lady patronesses, and long before nine o'clock every child was washed, combed, and brushed into shining cleanliness, with fresh, gray gowns, smoothly ironed check aprons, and neatly blacked shoes, and ranged in rows upon their stiff-backed seats along the school-room.

Rena grew very tired, and twisted herself back and forth, while Alice sat in mute awe, her little hands folded just as she had been bidden, and her cherry lips slightly apart. The visitors had been expected at nine o'clock, but it was some time after ten when Mrs. Mar, flushed and nervous in her black silk dress, ushered in three ladies, elegantly attired, bringing a scent of ottar of roses with them, and all talking at once!

"That's the Honorable Mrs. Heneage in the white shawl," whispered one of the girls to Rena, "and Lady Barrowfield has got the long yaller ear-drops. Ain't she dressed beautiful, though!"

Mrs. Heneage, a showy, handsome lady of about thirty, advanced into the room, laughing, talking and looking around her at the girls as if they were rows of tulips, and she an amateur gardener! For the idea that these soberly attired solemn-faced creatures, could be human like herself scarcely seemed to enter into the brain, which was surmounted by such an elegant French bonnet!

"I do think they grow scrawnier every day!" said she, elevating her pink-gloved hands. "My dear Mrs. Mar, why is it that our poorer classes are so frightfully plain!"

Mrs. Mar looked embarrassed. Lady Barrowfield, a surly pale-looking lady whispered:

"Don't speak so loud, Helen, they will hear you!"

"Oh, they won't understand!" said Mrs. Heneage. "I never saw any one yet, who—my goodness gracious—" she suddenly exclaimed, stopping in front of Rena "this girl is pretty. Who is she, and where did you pick her up?"

The Honorable Mrs. Heneage was quite right for once. Little Rena looked marvelously fair and delicate with her dark curls and soft hazel eyes, and the sweet pea-like bloom upon her cheeks, which deepened into carmine as the honorable lady put up her eye-glass, as though she was staring at some choice picture.

"Sir John Lavely sent her here," Mrs. Mar answered; "and her name is Rena Mordaunt!"

"Come here, you pretty little thing, and give me a kiss!" cried Mrs. Heneage, ecstatically; and Rena with the envious eyes of all the other three-and-thirty girls upon her, advanced, confused and embarrassed, to touch with her fresh dewy lips the cheek of the Honorable Mrs. Heneage.

This little incident settled Rena Mordaunt's standing in the Wykenham Refuge. Mrs. Heneage had kissed her, and noticed her specially, and the little populace there, like the average one of the outer world, was quick to take the one given by the gracious hand of aristocracy. There was no more insult, mockery, no more covert neglect, the girls clustered around Rena in an admiring throng as the Honorable Mrs. Heneage, Lady Barrowfield, and Mrs. Colonel Cluny were led away on an inspecting tour to the dormitory, refectory, and play-room.

"I wish I was you, Rena!" cried Mary Ann Jones.

"Ain't she dressed like the queen!" chimed in another. "Did you see them bracelets around her wrists? Wasn't you pleased, Rena Mordaunt?"

"I tasted the powder on her face," said Rena, with a grimace. "She isn't a bit pretty, and I don't want to kiss her again."

"La! do hear her talk?" said Mary Ann. "Why, ain't she the Honorable Mrs. Heneage, as keeps fourteen servants? Mary Ellis, as used to be here once, is under laundry-maid there, and she says they do have things elegant, and more money than they know how to spend."

"Let's go and play ball," said Rena, recklessly. "We don't have to sit still any longer, do we?"

"The lady visitors might come back," said Mary Ann, smoothing the gathers in her apron, "and——"

At this moment Mrs. Mar opened the door, looking redder and more excited than ever.

"Rena, my dear, come here," said she, eagerly. "Upon my word, you are in good luck!"

Rena obeyed the beckoning motion of her finger, albeit with a somewhat bewildered air.

"Should you like to be a lady, my dear?" said Mrs. Mar, leading her triumphantly away. "The Honorable Mrs. Heneage wishes to adopt you!"

And before Rena could realize what was meant by the matron's words she found herself in the august presence of the great lady herself.

It was quite true. The Honorable Mrs. Heneage, whose whims had all her life-time been humored, and who bought every long cashmere shawl, diamond set, or pony-phaeton that she happened to fancy, on the spot, had bethought herself that a bright-eyed little playmate would be not unacceptable to lighten the aristocratic gloom of her childless home, and Rena's pretty face had put the idea into her head.

"Come here, my pretty one," said Mrs. Heneage, drawing Rena close to her, "and tell me if you wouldn't like to be my little girl?"

"But I am not your little girl," expostulated Rena.

"But I can make you so, if I please," said Mrs. Heneage, patting the silky, down-drooping head. "Would you like to come with me, and wear elegant dresses every day, and ride in my carriage, and gather flowers in my garden, and have all the money to spend that you wanted?"

"Yes," said Rena, slowly; "if——"

"Yes, ma'am," prompted Mar, in a sort of stage whisper.

Mrs. Heneage turned sharply around.

"Don't be putting those charity-child conventionalities in her head, I beg of you," she said, with asperity. "Tell me, my little blossom," with her lips touched to the child's glowing cheek, "would you like to go with me?"

"If Allie goes, too," pronounced Rena, courageously.

"Who does she mean? Who is Allie?" asked Mrs. Heneage, looking at the matron.

"It's her little sister, ma'am, that came here with her, and sat next to her," answered Mrs. Mar.

"That faded little thing, with the red hair and the colorless eyes?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Nonsense!" said Mrs. Heneage, authoritatively. "I can't adopt the whole of Wykenham Refuge. I want you, child, and nobody else."

"Won't you take Allie, too?" wistfully asked Rena, looking up into Mrs. Heneage's eyes.

"Certainly not."

"Then I won't go," said Rena, resolutely. "I won't leave Allie!"

Mrs. Heneage appealed to the matron.

"Does the child know what nonsense she is talking, Mrs.

Mar?" she asked, petulantly. "Put up her things at once; I shall take her with me."

"No,' said Rena, with anger-sparkling eyes, "you shall not! I will not go with you! I'll stay with Allie!"

"My dear," soothed Mrs. Heneage, more attracted than ever by the child's beauty, heightened as it was by her tempest of infantile wrath, "you don't know how happy you will be. I'll buy you all the toys and picture-books you want, and——"

"I don't want your toys and picture-books!" interrupted Rena. "I want my sister Allie! No—no—no! I won't go with you! I say I won't!"

The Honorable Mrs. Heneage sat confounded. That a charity child should be insane enough to repel her gracious offers to open to her what might well seem the gates of Elysium, appeared quite incredible to her.

"I don't at all comprehend this, Mrs. Mar," she said, compelled to release Rena's struggling hand. "I think the discipline you maintain, or rather fail to maintain here, must be exceedingly defective."

"The child hasn't been here twenty-four hours yet, ma'am," apologized Mrs. Mar, humbly, "and I'm sure I am very sorry she is so naughty. Rena, my dear, I don't think you understand what it is that you are refusing. Mrs. Heneage is kind enough to offer to take you for her own little girl,"

"I don't like her!" cried the incensed Rena, stamping on the ground, a provokingly pretty little Fury. "I won't go and live with her and leave Allie! She's old and ugly, and I hate her!"

So the gates of a social Elysium, so far as Mrs. Heneage was concerned, were shut upon our little heroine. The lady patron went home in a rage. Mrs. Mar was sorely mortified by the unbridled expression of the honorable lady's displeasure, and poor Rena spent the rest of the day in solitary confinement, with bread and water to assist her penitential reflections.

"I hope you are sorry now," said Mrs. Mar, as she came at night to release the small culprit.

"No, I'm not!" resolutely declared Rena. "I'm not sorry one bit. I like *you*," with a sudden hug round the unsuspecting matron's neck, "but I don't like the tall lady, and I won't be her little girl."

"I don't know what to do with you, I am sure," sighed Mrs. Mar, feeling painfully that she ought to be vexed, and yet quite unable to summon up the necessary degree of indignation.

"Let me go and play," suggested Rena; "I'm so tired of staying here, and I want to see Allie."

But Rena Mordaunt's unwise frankness, although it had angered the Honorable Mrs. Heneage past all chance of reconciliation, had yet gained her another and a powerful friend, of whom she as yet knew nothing.

Lady Barrowfield, who had sat a silent witness to the whole scene, went home to her husband and put her slender, pretty arm around his neck, as he sat at a table looking over a heap of Parliamentary Blue-Books.

"Well, little one," he said, glancing up somewhat abstractedly, "what do you want now?"

"The set of oriental topazes that you promised me, Herbert——"

"I know," he interrupted, "and I'm ready to give a check at any time."

"But I don't want the jewels, Herbert; I would rather invest the money in another way."

"In what way, Clemence?" he asked, gravely, and she sat closer at his side, looking with a soft, pleading glance into his eyes.

"I want it to advance the future of two homeless little girls whom I saw at the Refuge to-day."

"If they are received into the Refuge, they are provided for already."

"Yes, as housemaids, or cooks, or upper-servants; but these little creatures seem to be worthy of a better future."

And she described the incident which had occurred in the matron's room that day, while Lord Barrowfield interrupted her to laugh heartily at the discomfiture of the Honorable Mrs. Heneage.

"That's just like Eleanor," he said. "If she wanted a lunar rainbow, she would think she ought to have it produced for her at once, on her own terms. So the little sprite wouldn't consent to be adopted, eh? Well, I must say that I like her spirit. But what do you want to do about it?"

"You will call it a mere fancy, Herbert," Lady Barrow-

field answered, coaxingly, "but I think I should like to take those two pretty little girls out of the Refuge and place them somewhere where their own efforts may raise them into a respectable position."

"At my expense?"

"At the expense of the oriental topaz set," laughed his wife.

"Well, my dear, I don't see why your whim should not be humored even if Eleanor Heneage's is not," said Lord Barrowfield. "What shall I do for the little independents?"

"I should like to put them into Miss Hartford's school at Hampstead."

"My dear! why that's the very hot-bed of juvenile aristocracy and refined young ladyhood."

"That is the very atmosphere I desire for my half-opened rosebuds. Miss Hartford will educate them for governesses, or companions, or something of that sort, to perfection. No one need know that they came from Wykenham Refuge, and they will, at least, be supplied with suitable weapons with which to fight the battle of their lonely young lives."

"But I can't understand why you have taken such a fancy to them, Clemence," said Lord Barrowfield.

"Nor I, scarcely; only that they are so little and helpless, and there is something so pathetic in their clinging affection for each other. You do not object to my plan, Herbert?"

"Not a particle, my dear," said Lord Barrowfield. "It seems to me rather a Utopian idea, but I am willing to indulge you in it, more especially as you don't often treat me to a caprice of that kind."

"You are the darlingest husband alive!" cried Lady Barrowfield, rewarding her liege lord with half a dozen kisses.

Lady Barrowfield was thoroughly in earnest when once she set about the prosecution of a plan. And the moon, then in the slender crescent of its silver glory, was not fairly past the full when Miss Hartford, of Hartford Lodge, in a retired part of Hampstead, received into her aristocratic "Establishment for Young Ladies" two little girls, brought thither under the auspices of no less distinguished a lady than the Baroness Barrowfield, and entered on the academi-

cal books under the respective nomenclatures of Rena and Alice Percival; for Lady Barrowfield judged it best that they should begin their new lives with a new name, and herself selected the appellation.

"I can't remember," said Miss Hartford, toying with the eye-glasses that hung at the end of a slender gold chain round her neck, "that her ladyship mentioned to me the exact degree of relationship, but I am under the impression that our new pupils are distantly connected with Lady Barrowfield's own family."

"Dear me," said Miss Trowbridge, the dumpy English governess, "is it possible? But I think I should have recognized their gentle blood in their faces. I can always recognize the aristocratic type of lineament, and it is quite unmistakable in these Misses Percival."

And Miss Trowbridge really believed what she said.

CHAPTER VIII.

MISS CHERITON'S ELOPEMENT.

Life at the fashionable boarding-school at Hampstead glided by with a gentle current, which was as new as it was delicious to the young creatures, whose stream of existence hitherto had been so full of peril and restless change. Both partook in some degree of the impulsive, affectionate temperament which is sure to endear others and win the coldest heart with a sort of magnetic attraction. Both accordingly grew to be the popular favorites of the school, miniature queens, rulers in the petty world which surrounded them.

As often as once a year Lady Barrowfield herself came to visit her little *protegees*, until her death, which occurred when Rena was about fifteen. They first learned of the melancholy occurrence through Miss Hartford, who sent for the sisters into her private reception-room, to impart to them the sorrowful tidings, with her handkerchief held decorously to her eyes.

"Dead! Lady Barrowfield dead!" cried Rena, in astonishment, while Alice stood by silently.

"My dear, we are all partakers of the doom of mortality," sighed Miss Hartford, "and her ladyship's health has been painfully delicate for years. I sympathize with you deeply, my darling girls, for——"

"But what are we going to do?" broke in Rena, abruptly, for at that moment she felt as if the mainstay of her own young life were drawn suddenly away. She had grown, almost unconsciously, to depend upon Lady Barrowfield, to feel as if, in a measure, she had some claim upon the pale, sweet-faced lady who had turned the current of her destiny with her jeweled hand.

"I was going to tell you, my dear," said Miss Hartford. "Her ladyship left directions in her will that you and your sister should be continued here until the age of nineteen, at which time you will graduate."

"It was very kind of her," said Rena, wistfully, and she listened mechanically to Miss Hartford's string of platitudes that followed on the loss of their "dear relative."

"We are not in any way related to Lady Barrowfield," said Rena, turning suddenly round.

"Not related to her!" echoed Miss Hartford.

"No!" Rena answered, curtly.

"But I thought——"

"I can't help what you thought," said Rena, resolutely. "We are no relatives whatever to Lady Barrowfield. Come, Alice, the French professor must be here already, and we have not even thought of our exercises."

The other girls were all curiosity respecting the sudden death of the Misses Percival's friend, and the reappearance of Rena and Alice in the school-room was a signal for a shower of queries.

"Of course you'll be asked to the funeral?" said Emily Darte. "My Aunt Helen says it will be something very grand."

"Of course she won't," said Adela Cheriton, a haughty blonde of seventeen, who cordially disliked Rena Percival, because nature had endowed her with a larger share of brains than she herself was fortunate enough to possess. "*She* is no relation to Lady Barrowfield!" And then, in a stage whisper, purposely intended to be audible, she added, "Mamma knows the Barrowfields, and she says my lady picked up these Percival children somewhere and adopted them. Relatives! indeed, I wouldn't give much for *their* relatives!"

"Wouldn't you, indeed?" demanded Rena, with a contemptuous pout of her cherry lip.

"No, I wouldn't!" retorted Miss Cheriton, with brightening color and scintillating eyes. "Some people have a sort of managing way that ingratiates them with those who aren't over particular about their associates, but it's only surface-deep!"

"Come, Adela Cheriton," said Rena, walking composedly up to her tall adversary, "I don't want any more of this nonsense. Speak out plainly, or don't speak at all—that's my motto. Do you mean *me*, by 'some people?'"

"I don't choose to render explanations to you!" haughtily responded Miss Cheriton, a little awed, if the truth must be spoken, by Rena's determined manner.

"If I were a man I would knock you down!" said Rena, dauntlessly.

"Fortunately you are not!" flashed back Adela Cheriton, "although I really don't see why you should hesitate at any-

thing. I dare say you have been quite accustomed to that style of argument."

"If I touched you at all," said Rena, elevating her eyebrows with provoking command of temper, "I should send down to the kitchen and borrow a frying-pan or an iron skillet to do it with! There's a correspondence in things."

This sally produced a universal titter among the girls, as it was well-known that Miss Cheriton's maternal grandfather had made his large fortune in the iron trade, beginning with the humble avocation of hawking frying-pans from door to door.

Miss Cheriton turned scarlet, her eyes flashed, and her heavy lips quivered ominously.

"Rena Percival," she cried, "I won't be insulted!"

"I wouldn't, if I were you!" said Rena, audaciously.

"At least," went on Adela, in a choked voice, "*my* relatives were honest people!"

"Dear me!" interrupted Rena, "who was talking about anybody's relatives? I'm sure I never alluded to any such topics."

"And there *are* people," added Adela, growing fairly purple, "who haven't any at all."

"There *are* ghosts, and fairies, and brownies, and all sorts of unaccountable things," said Rena, with a gay, mocking laugh.

But she felt the envenomed arrow rankle in her breast, after all, more especially so, as the tears ran in Alice's eyes as she followed her sister to their own room.

"Don't mind her, Allie," she whispered, passing her arm caressingly round the other's shoulders, and laying her cheek against Alice's lips. "She's only a quarrelsome, vicious-tempered young virago, and nothing more!"

"She insulted us, Rena."

"Of course she did; it's her delight to insult people. Who minds her? Now you are crying, Allie, darling. Don't, please don't, precious; you wouldn't, if you knew that every one of those bright drops hurts me more than a whole dictionary full of the Cheriton's slanders. I'll teach her to spit out her gratuitous insolence to people."

"What are you going to do, Rena?"

"I'm going to show her that I am not to be bullied with impunity, that's all."

And Rena burst out merrily laughing.

"I wish you would tell me what you mean, dear," pleaded Alice.

"To do just what I have accomplished," laughed Rena. "Dry those tears and make you smile again. Come, you promised to put the blue ribbon hoops on my cape this afternoon, and I want to wear it."

And while Alice's deft little fingers turned, twisted, and adjusted the soft folds of azure ribbon, her sister rummaged in the old portfolio, which contained their literary belongings.

"What are you looking for, Rena?" the younger sister asked, carelessly,

"Only my exercise-book," Rena answered, with a demure twinkle in her eyes. "I've found it now!"

But it was not her exercise-book which she had sought and found; it was merely a sheet of written sentences which M. Adolphe Lemaire, the French teacher, had given her a month ago to work into compositions, the better to accustom herself to the foreign idioms and phrases.

M. Adolphe Lemaire was a tall, sentimental-looking Frenchman, with liquid dark eyes, a silky jet mustache, and features as correctly chiseled as a cameo. Add to this the fact that he was only six or seven-and-twenty, with chivalrous manners, full of dignity and reserve, and a romantic story of ancient descent and blighted circumstance, and it will scarcely be marveled at that half the demoiselles at Hartford Lodge professed an adoration for Monsieur Lemaire.

Miss Cheriton, in particular, took no pains to conceal her admiration for the dark-eyed Gascon, but openly treasured a faded moss rosebud which had once fallen from the young professor's button-hole, and declared she would give half she owned in the world for a lock of the shining black hair which drooped in wavy rings over the young man's ivory-fair forehead. Miss Cheriton was in no way distinguished as a scholar, but if she did work hard and conscientiously at any one thing it was her French. It signified little to her whether or not she was a fool in either respect, but she sighed for M. Lemaire's softly spoken words of approbation—a need which, to tell the truth, she was very seldom gratified by receiving.

"Still at your French exercise, my dear?" resumed Miss Hartford, as she passed through the study-room that even-

ing, and saw Rena bending silently over her desk. "Really, you deserve great credit for your industry and perseverance."

"Rena looked up, the bright pink mantling her cheek.

"Monsieur Lemaire is so particular with us," she answered, demurely.

Adela Cheriton went up to her room that evening to put a white rose in among her blonde braids, for Miss Cheriton fully appreciated her own full blossomed beauty, and liked to heighten it by all manner of artfully applied little accessories. She was about to take a hair-pin from the embroidered cushion, on the toilet table, when something white, half hidden under the fringe, caught her eye—a letter, directed simply "To the Blonde Mademoiselle," and with a sudden flush of scarlet to her cheek, she recognized the peculiarly pointed handwriting of Monsieur Adolphe Lemaire.

Hastily she carried it to the window, where the last crimson tints of sunset yet lingered in the west, affording a sufficiency of light to decipher the contents of the billet-doux, for such it proved.

A real, genuine love-letter, such as Adela Cheriton, with all her romantic proclivities, and novel reading habits, had never before perused—a letter breathing ardent affection, and expressed in the prettiest and quaintest of English, with here and there a French expression woven in, as if the Anglo-Saxon language did not contain words warm and expressive enough for M. Lemaire's tender thoughts to embody themselves in.

Adela's cheeks glowed, her eyes glittered, and her heart throbbed as she read. M. Adolphe Lemaire loved her after all; he had lost his ardent young heart to her golden hair, and liquid blue eyes, He told her so in language that there was no mistaking; he asked her if she could consent to allow him to worship directly at her shrine, and enjoined again and again the strictest secrecy; for Miss Hartford, as he gracefully expressed it, was a "slave to conventionalities," and his position depended solely upon his own self-command, and her discretion, and he closed by hinting that a note left in the hollow of an old cherry tree, in the least frequented alley of the old-fashioned garden back of the house, would be brought straight to him by a messenger whom he could trust.

Adela Cheriton kissed the pink-scented paper over and

over again, and sat down to consider the exigencies of this new development of her hitherto somewhat monotonous life. Was it really true? Could it actually be possible that M. Adolphe Lemaire was in love with her?

Miss Cheriton retired early that night, with a ragiug headache, as she said; and Miss Trowbridge, who happened to be in charge of the school-room, on that particular evening, looked at her crimson cheeks, and expressed her fears that Miss Cheriton was feverish.

"Do let me call Miss Hartford to give you a little aconite," she said, "or take a few drops of red lavender in in water."

"Nonsense," said Adela, rudely. Miss Trowbridge was stout, and short, and *passee*, and a dependent, forced to work hard for a living, and Miss Cheriton considered it quite superfluous to be polite to such people. "I sha'n't do any such thing; I'm well enough, only for a headache, and I wish you'd stop bothering!"

So Adela went up stairs, but not to bed. Miss Hartford came to her room at ten o'clock, to enforce the regulation about the extinguishing of lights in the sleeping apartments at that hour.

"Dear Miss Hartford," coaxed Adela, who was propped up in bed among her pillows, with a portfolio deftly hidden under the sheet, and an ink-stand behind the bed-post, "don't please take away the light. I'm so nervous, and I fancy all sorts of horrible things in the dark."

"I will send Miss Percival in to sleep with you, my dear," argued the preceptress.

"Oh, don't do that!" said Adela, shrugging one white shoulder out of her ruffled night-dress, "she would drive me frantic! I must always be alone when I have these frightful headaches! Dear, kind Miss Hartford, do indulge me, just for once."

And Miss Hartford indulged her, and the letter, copied and recopied, was duly written and posted in the hollow of the moss-grown old cherry tree, by Adela's own hand, the next morning.

Miss Cheriton blushed and fluttered, and grew as tremulous as an aspen-leaf that day, when M. Lemaire bent over her to correct a glaring mistake in her French composition.

"Pardon, mademoiselle, but you do not comprehend,"

he said, taking the pencil out of her hand to strike out the obnoxious word.

"Oh, I do, monsieur, I do," she faltered, with her big blue eyes raised for one instant to his face. Surely—surely, his hand had lingered upon hers, with a gentle pressure, as he took the pencil away—and she was satisfied. And her fair forehead was contracted by a momentary frown, as she saw how intently Rena Percival was watching her.

"The envious thing," she thought; "if I only dared to tell her."

For about a week the correspondence went on dashingly, at the rate of a note per day, and sometimes more, while M. Lemaire, over and over again, enjoined upon his pupil the necessity for the utmost caution in school hours, until Adela scarcely ventured either to look at or speak to him during the hour in which they were together; and, at the end of that time, Adela packed her jewels and love-letters, and made stealthy preparations for an elopement, according to the proposal hazarded in M. Adolph's last missive.

To the romantic, unreasoning schoolgirl this was an elysium of delicious mystery and undefined bliss. An elopement, just exactly like a three-volume novel and with the pensively handsome Frenchman, Adela could conceive of no more brilliant ending to her school-day life. Of course papa and mamma, and Miss Hartford would be horrified—elderly people always were—but they would easily reconcile themselves to the inevitable when all was over and past remedy, and Madame Adolph Lemaire could fall so gracefully on her knees and plead for pardon in such plaintive phrases! Again and again Adela rehearsed the scene over to herself, as, having scaled the wall in the starry, luminous darkness of the July evening, she stole down the shady lane, at the end of which her Adolph had assured her that a carriage should be waiting.

It happened that upon this special day of all others, Rena Percival had coaxed Miss Hartford to drive into London. Her caps were getting dolefully shabby, Rena declared, and Miss Hartford always liked to have Rena help select her coiffures, and the lace collars in which the elderly lady's soul delighted "weren't fit to be seen!" Miss Hartford was rather reluctant to go into town on such a broiling day, but Rena was always accustomed to getting her own way, and she got it this time. Now, so skillfully did Rena arrange

her times and seasons, that the carriage drove slowly up the lane, just as Adela, wrapped in a dark shawl to blend her figure as much as possible with the surrounding objects, glided down its shadowy way. Suddenly Rena pulled the check-string.

"Stop a minute, George," she whispered to the coachman. "I believe I've dropped my handkerchief."

The carriage came to a stand-still. Rena stealthily opened the door, and Adela Cheriton sprang in, exclaiming almost hysterically:

"Adolphe! dear Adolphe!"

Miss Hartford screamed with terror. Rena received the full weight of the bouncing blonde in her lap.

"What does all this mean?" sternly demanded the usually indulgent preceptress. "Can it be possible that this is you, Miss Cheriton? And why are you screaming after 'Adolphe'? Where is he?" and she looked around in a bewildered way.

"He loves me; we are to be married; he promised to elope with me!" gasped Adela, scarcely knowing, in her confusion, what she was saying.

"Who?" questioned Miss Hartford, half-inclined to doubt the evidence of her own sense of hearing.

"M. Lemaire—my own, own Adolphe!"

"Nonsense!" slowly ejaculated Miss Hartford.

"It isn't nonsense, it's the gospel-truth!" asserted Adela, growing more and more hysterical and incoherent. "You think you can bind love in iron fetters; you set too much value on the meaningless forms and ceremonies of a cruel world. His heart is all mine; I am willing to trust my future solely and entirely to him. Let me get out, I say! you have no right to stop me!"

She struggled violently to escape from Miss Hartford's detaining hands.

"My dear, my dear!" said the poor lady; "there is some mistake here. M. Lemaire is engaged to a young French lady who gives lessons at the Fricandiere Institute."

"It is false!" cried Adela, theatrically. "I have his dear letters here—see!" and she held them full in the glare of the carriage-lamps.

"I am afraid I must answer in some degree for that nonsense," said Rena, with well-assumed gravity and perplexity. "M. Lemaire has never seen one of those letters, much less written them. I wrote them just for fun. I never

supposed but that it was equally a joke on your part to reply to them, Miss Cheriton. Is it possible that you really supposed M. Adolphe Lemaire had fallen in love with you?"

Before the next day's sun had set, the story of Adela Cheriton's elopement with nobody was known throughout the school. M. Adolphe Lemaire himself had evidently gleaned some inkling of the ridiculous occurrence, or the girls fancied he had; at all events, there was a sparkle of amusement in his dark eyes, as he read them a "dictation lesson," which was not accounted for by any humorous bent in the author he had selected to read from. Adela herself was really sick in bed from rage, disappointment, and mortification, and Rena Percival went to inquire after her with ostentatious solicitude.

"I owe all of this to you, miss," said Adela, biting her lip, and clenching her hand until the blood stood in dark blue dots under every nail; "and I'll be quits with you yet!"

"Don't excite yourself, dear, or you'll be worse," said Rena, innocently.

Miss Hartford read her young favorite a gentle little lecture, but Rena kissed away the words almost before they were uttered.

"I don't approve of practical jokes, my dear," said Miss Hartford; "and——"

"Then she shouldn't have made Allie cry," interposed Rena. "I don't care how insolent she chose to be, as far as I was concerned, but I won't have my sister teased and tormented."

"But, my dear Rena——"

"It has done her good, Miss Hartford; her conceit was like a towering, rank weed, which the sickle of my little plot has pruned. Isn't that a nice figure of speech. I mean to write it down for my rhetoric lesson to-morrow morning."

And Rena danced away as lightly as if her little slippers were "finished off" with wings, like a female Mercury.

"I think Adela Cheriton and girls of her stripe will let me alone after this," she thought; and she was right.

In the little world of a boarding-school, a girl who is not afraid to assert herself is sure to be respected accordingly. And after this incident Rena Percival and her gentle sister were more popular than ever.

CHAPTER IX.

SCHOOL FRIENDSHIPS.

"If you would go to her, just for a minute, Miss Rena; she's sobbin' as if her poor heart would break, and declarin' she won't stay, not another day."

"Homesick, poor thing!" said Rena Percival, to whom the good-natured housemaid had addressed herself. "Which room is it, Jane?"

"The third on the second floor, miss. Miss Parker went there and knocked, but she wouldn't so much as answer, and Miss Parker was shy-like of disturbin' her against her will."

"There are some people that must be done good to, in spite of themselves, Jane," said Rena, gayly, as she went away.

Rena Percival at eighteen was one of the loveliest creatures poet's pen can describe, or artist's brain imagine. Rather dark than otherwise, without being a decided brunette, her hair hung low over a pearl-pure forehead, and jetty eyebrows tapered to a mere thread on either side over arched eyes of a deep liquid hazel. Her nose, slightly *retrousse*, gave an excellent archness to her bright face, and her lips, scarlet, full and perfectly shaped, were dimpled with smiles which betokened the overflowing gayety of her maiden heart.

Thus radiant in her fresh young beauty, and singing as she went, Rena Percival tripped along the corridor to the "third room on the second floor," according to Jane's directions, and, knocking softly, paused an instant to listen.

No very unusual sounds they were which reached her ears as she stood there, sobs and tears and shuddering sighs, the index of a homesick girl's heart on her first separation from the beloved scenes of her childhood, and without pausing to repeat her knock, Rena opened the door and went in.

"Lady Blanche Arden," she said, gently, "what is the matter?"

A tall, gipsy-looking girl of sixteen or thereabouts was crouched on the sofa at the farthest end of the apartment, her face buried in the cushions, and her shoulders swaying to and fro with a restless rocking motion, which kept a sort of time to her sobs.

"Go away!" she exclaimed, with an irritated motion of the head, as Rena placed her hand on her forehead. "I hate you all! I hate school! I won't stay here!"

"Yes, you will," said Rena, sitting down beside her and taking the disheveled head to rest on her own shoulder. "It is nice, and you will like it after a little while. All the girls are homesick at first."

The young girl made an effort to escape, but Rena's clasp, though very tender, was firm, and she let her wearied head fall once more on the kind shoulder, while the tears streamed fast over her flushed cheeks.

"That's right!" soothed Rena, with a soft, magnetic motion of her cool palms over the throbbing forehead. "Cry as much as you please—it will make you feel better."

"Were you homesick when you first came here?" asked the girl, lifting her heavy, tear-swollen eyes to Rena's face.

"All girls are," was Rena's evasive reply; "but they soon get over it, and you'll be sure to be happy here—every one is so kind."

"Have you been here long?"

"Nine years."

Lady Blanche looked surprised.

"Ah! But you have no mother?"

"No," said Rena, sadly; "I have only a sister, and she is here with me."

"You are very pretty," said Lady Blanche, with an innocent frankness that was utterly devoid of anything approaching to flattery. "What is your name?"

"Rena Percival. Now lie still, and let me wet your hair with cologne. How hot your forehead feels."

Lady Blanche lay quiet with the stillness of exhaustion, which must necessarily succeed such a tempest of emotion as had shaken her slender frame during the last hour or two, but her hand closed with nervous pressure over Rena's wrist, and there was something piteously clinging in the way her head nestled against the elder girl's shoulder.

Miss Hartford came in presently on tiptoe.

Rena smiled up in her face.

"Is she asleep?"

Rena nodded assent.

"Poor thing! I am so glad!" whispered the kind-hearted preceptress. "She is the only daughter of the Countess of Glenhampton. They thought a change would be beneficial to her, but she has never been separated from her mother before. Don't you think she is pretty?"

Rena made a negative motion of her head, as she surveyed the calm, sleeping lineaments, with the dew of scarcely dried tears yet hanging on the heavy eyelashes, and a crimson spot on each cheek.

"Not pretty," she said; "I should rather call her handsome."

"Do you know, my dear," said Miss Hartford, with almost a start, "there is a strange likeness between you, as your faces are there, side by side?"

Rena glanced across at a mirror which, hanging on the opposite side of the room, reflected the little group. She smiled and shook her head.

"It is your fancy, Miss Hartford," she said, lightly. "I do not perceive anything approaching to a likeness."

"Not just now, for she is pale and passive, while you are all smiles and dimples, and sparkling eyes and pink cheeks; but, a minute ago, when you were silent and quiet, you *did* look strangely alike."

Miss Hartford darkened the blinds, drew down the muslin shades, and went out of the room on tiptoe, and for nearly an hour Rena sat there, the slender fingers grasping her wrist, and the pale forehead pillowed upon her shoulder.

"How strangely the prizes and blanks are apportioned in Life's lottery," Rena thought, half mournfully, as she looked down upon the fair, aristocratic young face. "Both of us girls, both young and both passably pretty, but there the parallel ceases. I have my own way to fight in the world—she has hers all made for her, the path carpeted with flowers, and the very winds of heaven prevented from blowing too roughly on her brow! I am poor—she's rich."

She sighed softly—a strange sound to come from one so young and so beautiful, but she never moved, until Lady Blanche Arden waked with a start, unaware, for the instant,

whose eyes were shining down into her own with such a tender, hazel light!

"Will you be my friend, Miss Percival?" she asked, with a caressing shyness in her manner. "I think I shall like you very much!"

And thus began a friendship between the two girls, which grew into protecting tenderness on the side of the elder one, a sort of admiring idolatry on the part of the younger. In the peaceful days, before the great instinct of wifehood is developed in the heart of the young maiden, there comes a season in which she elevates into the shrine of a goddess some blessed companion, investing her with all the attributes of purity and perfection, clinging to her with blind devotion, treasuring up her looks, her words, her smiles! Rena Percival was the goddess whom Blanche Arden worshiped with all the passionate loving ardor of her sixteen young years!

The months crept away until the year rounded itself into its fullness of time, and drew near to the evening preceding Rena and Alice Percival's graduation day.

The young ladies of the graduating class, only nine or ten in number—for Miss Hartford prided herself more and more upon the exclusive selectness of her establishment—were to wear white muslin dresses, with broad blue sashes, and blue ribbons in their hair, their only ornaments a bunch of white roses worn in the corsage or at the belt. Alice sat in her room, putting the last dainty stitches in the dress she was to be adorned with on the morrow.

"Why don't you have a dressmaker do it?" Lady Blanche had innocently asked, and Alice had answered, calmly:

"Because we can't afford it, Blanche, dear. We are not rich like you."

She was murmuring the refrain of a little Italian ballad to herself, at her work, when the door opened, and Rena entered.

Alice glanced up with a smile.

"Why, Rena, darling, how your eyes sparkle!" she exclaimed; "and what is that letter in your hand?"

"What do you suppose, dear?" laughingly asked Rena, as she sat down by her sister's side, and passed one arm around Alice's slender waist.

"I cannot guess."

"Of course you can't—you couldn't if you were to try for a twelvemonth!"

"Tell me what it is?"

"An offer of marriage, little innocence!"

She held the letter triumphantly above her sister's head as she spoke, contemplating Alice's face of surprise and bewilderment.

"Rena, from whom?"

"Not Monsieur Lemaire," laughed Rena, archly. "It's from the Reverend Decimus!"

The Reverend Decimus Kent, the tenth son of a country clergyman, down in Dorsetshire, was the theological instructor at Hartford Lodge, thereby earning a slight addition to the by no means plenteous stipend attached to his hard-worked London curacy. He was tall and pale, with thin, colorless hair, light blue eyes, and a face which by no means did justice to the genius, self-denial, and nobility of his nature. He had firmly resolved never to marry, not because he did not fully appreciate the advantages of a cozy home and a domestic circle sacred to himself, but because he knew his salary was too small, his hopes too slender, to warrant involving another life in his own patient career of self-sacrifice.

But what are human resolutions worth, even the boldest and most steadfast of them, when they are actually subjected to the tests of temptation? The Reverend Decimus, vowed to celebacy though he was, somehow got Rena Percival's dark eyes and wavy hair curiously commingled with Paley's Theology and Blair's Sermons, and waked, all of a sudden, to the overwhelming consciousness that he was in love with the pretty little enchantress, who listened so gravely to his expositions.

Of course he resolved to conquer his folly, but there are some species of folly more difficult to conquer than others; and the more the Reverend Decimus Kent determined he would not think about Rena Percival, the more he thought about her.

"I must remove myself out of the way of temptation," thought Mr. Kent. And he sat down and wrote a long letter to a country rector—an old friend of his father's—offering his services as an assistant during the ensuing summer.

"If he accepts my offer," thought Mr. Kent, "I will take

it as a sign that I should remain a single man; if, through any unforeseen concatenation of circumstances, he declines my assistance——"

And leaving the sentence unfinished in his brain, he asked himself over and over again whether it were possible that one so young and so beautiful as Rena Percival could ever be his wife?

"But, of course, Mr. Glenholme will accept me," he thought, rather disconsolately. "He has a large parish, and work enough for half a dozen curates; there can be no manner of doubt about that."

And Mr. Kent was half sorry that he had written the eventful epistle.

In due time, the Reverend Mr. Glenholme's answer arrived. He was "much obliged to his young friend, quite as much so, in fact, as if it had been practicable for him to accept Mr. Kent's kind proposition; but, for the ensuing summer, he had already secured a sufficiency of help."

The Reverend Decimus Kent threw the letter into the air with a hurrah like that of a disfranchised schoolboy. It was as if a dreary cloud had suddenly rolled away from the horizon of his life, disclosing the royal sun in all its blaze of beauty. And then he sat down again, with his heart beating like half a dozen trip-hammers condensed into one, to write the very letter which Miss Percival was now waving so triumphantly over her sister's head.

"Mr. Kent," slowly repeated Alice, as if scarcely able to credit her ears. "An offer of marriage from Mr. Kent!"

"Himself and none other," cried Rena. "Only to think of it, Alice, that Mr. Kent, with his polysyllabic words and solemn dignity, should have chanced to fall in love with silly, frivolous little me."

"It *is* strange," mused Alice. "May I read the letter, Rena?"

"Of course you may," said Rena, tossing the epistle which had cost poor Decimus Kent so much deliberation and thought into her sister's lap.

Alice glanced over the letter with more interest than her sister had evinced.

"Why, Rena, how dearly he must love you!" she exclaimed, as she laid it down.

"Yes," said Rena, composedly, "I think he loves me."

"Shall you accept him, Rena?"

"Accept him!" Rena opened wide her lovely hazel eyes with an expression of astonished incredulity as to whether she had heard her sister aright. "I! Accept Decimus Kent!"

"Why not, dear Rena?"

"Look at me!" Rena drew herself up to her full height. "Do I appear like the sort of person to bury myself alive in a London curacy? They call me pretty—nay, I can see it for myself when I look into the glass—that beauty shall mark out for me a career such as I have always sighed for. I, to marry Decimus Kent! Alice, I think you must be a little demented!"

"Rena!"

"Don't look so grave and grieved, little one. I am only saying out what others think. We are both standing on life's threshold, and who can tell what possibilities of untried fate may lie before us. Do you think I would eclipse all hopes and chances in the humdrum name and life of Mrs. Decimus Kent?"

"But he is a good man, Rena."

"And I don't pretend to be in any way allied to the tribe of earthly angels, so you see we shouldn't assimilate."

"And he loves you!"

"So I mean shall a good many people before I have reached middle life."

"Rena! Rena!" said Alice, gravely, shaking her head, "you are too ambitious."

"No, I am not—no one who has her own way to make in the world can be too ambitious. Beauty is a powerful engine, and I mean mine shall serve me well. Who knows, little Alice, perhaps some day I may wear a coronet on my brow!"

"Do you set wealth and station above happiness?"

"I mean to have both. Hush! there is a knock at the door. Come in, whoever you are."

It was Nancy, the door girl.

"Miss Hartford's compliments, Miss Percival, and Miss Alice, and would like to have you come to her in her room for a few minutes, if quite agreeable to you."

CHAPTER X.

RENA'S CHOICE.

Miss Hartford's reception-room was a prettily furnished apartment, always scented with roses, newly cut and arranged in vases during the summer months, and exhaling sweetness from huge Japanese jars of dried petals during the winter.

In one hand she held an open letter, in the other were her gold eye-glasses.

"Come in, my dears, and sit down," said Miss Hartford, welcoming the young sisters with a smile. "So you are to graduate to-morrow. Dear me, how the time flies."

"It's the way of the world, Miss Hartford," said Rena, sitting down on a low stool beside the old lady's chair, and laying her cheek against the wrinkled white hand that rested against its cushioned arm. "You have sent away too many young birds, newly fledged and eager to try their wings, to wonder that we, too, are anxious."

"That is what I wished to speak to you about, Rena," said Miss Hartford, gravely. "I think I may say that you two girls have received every advantage of education that it was possible to give you. You are excellent musicians, both in the vocal and instrumental branches, and Alice has a superior voice. You are both good linguists, moderately skilled mathematicians, and accomplished in the departments of natural science. You have well improved your time here, and I think Lady Barrowfield herself could not have failed to be perfectly satisfied with you. In short, girls, I have done my duty, and you have done yours."

"Of which two facts," observed Rena, gravely, "the latter is the most to be marveled at."

"And now," went on Miss Hartford, scarcely noticing Rena's speech in the graver considerations which were occupying her mind, "the question now naturally presents itself, what is to be done next."

Both girls remained silent, for they saw that Miss Hartford had not finished all that she had to say.

"I have here a letter," she added, after a moment's

silence, tapping the unfolded sheet in her lap, "from a clergyman in Cardiganshire, Wales, the Reverend Ralph Eskett, who solicits my good offices in assisting him to select a governess for his three little girls. The situation, near the sea, and not distant from the picturesque mountain ranges of Northern Wales, is delightful, as I can myself testify, having once visited my friend, Mrs. Eskett, three years ago. The family are charming, and would make a home for any young lady, who came to them in the capacity of governess, and the salary is thirty-five pounds per annum, a very nice sum," continued Miss Hartford, with an air of subdued triumph. "I have written to Mr. Eskett, that my young friend, Miss Percival, would probably suit his requirements in all respects, and I am only waiting for your sanction, Rena, to seal up my letter, and send it to the post-office at once."

Rena was silent. Miss Hartford at once jumped to the conclusion that she was overwhelmed by the brilliant prospects that lay before her.

"I know you are quite inexperienced, my dear," she added; "but I think, with application and care, you can hardly fail to fill the position to the satisfaction of Mr. and Mrs. Eskett. You need not allow any misgivings about your sister to influence your decision, as I can easily make her useful in the charge of the elementary classes here until a similar opportunity offers itself for her satisfactory establishment in life. Nor need you be perplexed as to a suitable outfit, as Lady Barrowfield's executors have directed that the sum of fifty pounds be paid to your credit, at any time you choose to draw it from the bank. Fifty pounds ought to purchase a very nice and complete wardrobe for any young lady, even allowing a margin for some little extras."

And Miss Hartford looked triumphantly at Rena, as if she thought she had placed at her disposal the key to a mine of gold.

"I will finish my letter at once," she said, "and tell them you will be happy to undertake the charge."

"You need not, Miss Hartford," said Rena, in a voice that was exquisitely soft and low, and yet as resolute as if every word had been a thunderbolt. "I do not wish to accept the situation."

"Not wish to accept the situation!" Miss Hartford's eyes

grew stony, her lips fell apart. If Rena had told her she did not wish to go to heaven, she could scarcely have been more astonished. "Rena, my dear, I don't think you know what you are saying."

"Yes, I do," asserted Rena, with quiet fixedness of purpose. "I do not wish to be a governess—at present, at least."

"But, Rena, you know that your term of tuition expires here to-morrow?"

"I am aware of it."

"Have you any idea what you are to do? Whither you are to go?"

"Yes," said Rena, calmly. "Lady Blanche Arden has been kind enough to invite me to go home with her to Glenhampton Castle, to spend a few weeks, and I have accepted the invitation."

"Rena," murmured Alice, in accents of tender reproach, "you never told me this!"

"Because I did not quite know whether my decision was, or was not, final; but my mind is made up now to go."

"I cannot say that I think you have decided wisely, Rena," said Miss Hartford. "But if you are disinclined to accept the position, I suppose it would be useless for me to urge it upon you."

"Quite useless, ma'am."

"And I may as well write to the Esketts to look elsewhere for a governess for those poor little girls?"

"As far as I am concerned, yes, ma'am."

"Stop a moment, Miss Hartford!" said Alice, who had hitherto sat quite silent. "Since Rena is resolved not to accept this situation, do you think that I could give satisfaction to your friends?"

"My dear," said Miss Hartford, dropping the gold eyeglasses on the floor in her astonishment, "I never once thought of you!"

Alice stooped to pick up the glasses.

"I would do my very best," she said, wistfully. "I am not so brilliant as Rena, but I believe that I have thoroughly mastered all the branches to which I have applied myself, and I think I could teach three little girls."

"Of course you could," said Miss Hartford; "and I dare say Mr. Eskett would be very glad to have you. But I had

planned to keep you here a little longer, Alice; the younger girls are very fond of you, and——"

"Why should you seek to spare me longer from the rough contact with the world, to which I must eventually come; sooner or later, Miss Hartford?" asked Alice, almost mournfully. "I have my own living to earn—my own bread to get. You are very kind to me; been almost too kind, I think, for it would spoil me to be long petted and indulged, as I have been here. But I cannot remain at Hartford Lodge always, and it is better for me to take some such situation as this, where the pupils are young, and the duties compararively light and easy, by way of testing my powers as an instructress of youth. Will you please ask the Reverend Mr. Eskett if he will give me a trial?"

"I shall ask no such question, my dear," said Miss Hartford, nodding her head, emphatically. "Ralph Eskett has written to me, asking me to select a governess for him. If I select you, it follows, as a natural sequence, that he will be glad and happy to give you the trial, and no further questions need to be asked. I will scratch out Rena's name in my letter, and insert yours; that will obviate the necessity of rewriting it. I can recommend you quite as cheerfully and sincerely as I could your sister, who occurred to me as the elder, and consequently, most likely to desire the situation."

She kissed Alice's cheek as she spoke.

Rena nestled close to her, with a winning pretense of loving jealousy.

"You are not angry with me, Miss Hartford?"

"Not angry, dear; only grieved that you should be so blind to your own interests," the old lady answered, stroking down the bright hair beneath her touch. "I think Alice has chosen wisely; as far as your choice, time only can determine whether it be for well or ill."

And the two sisters went back to their own rooms, feeling vaguely that they had already caught a glimpse of the great, far-off, misty future that lay beyond the walls of their school-room.

CHAPTER XI.

LADY BLANCHE'S HOME.

The graduation passed off, as all graduations do, with the usual routine of music, speech-making, bouquets, and compliments, and on the following day the scholars exchanged affectionate adieus, departed, and soon Hartford Lodge was deserted.

"How beautiful the country is, dear Blanche! I have seen pictures with just such purple hills, and bending skies, and little streams glimmering through the woods. Oh, I could dream on forever in such a spot as this!"

Rena Percival's cheek was glowing, and her beautiful face lighted up with the enthusiasm of the moment, as, with Lady Blanche Arden beside her, she leaned back among the satin cushions of the elegant landau which had been sent to the railway station to meet the two girls.

"And what are all these people doing in the fields?" went on Rena, leaning forward, while the evening breeze lifted the tiny ringlets from her forehead and fluttered the strings of her white straw hat. "Oh, Blanche, see how picturesque they look, moving about like the figures in a panorama!"

"They are haymakers," said Blanche. "Yes, I suppose they are picturesque, although I never thought about it before; you know we see them here every year, and I suppose custom has familiarized me to the sight."

As she spoke the words the gray, stone tower and steep, ivy-covered roof of St. Hilda's Church came in view round a curve in the road, its ancient buttresses and stone copings gilded by the lone light of the declining sun, and like a sudden electric flash the scene of ten years ago rose up before Rena Percival's eyes—the serene Kent landscape, the sunset flooding all the wooded dales and meadow slopes, and the far-off voices of the toilers mingling with the song of birds and the rustle of ivy leaves around the old gray church. Her cheeks burned, her eyes glittered with troubled light, as with a vague sort of double life—a consciousness of mingled past and present, she seemed to see the white-haired old man sitting in the church porch, with his crossed hands

on the top of his staff, and two sunburned, wild-haired little elves creeping down the wide aisle of the sacred edifice within, starting at the sound of their own voices, and filled with shy delight to see the bars of orange and ruby and blue light quivering down through the stained glass splendors of the western oriels. and lying like shattered rainbows at their feet! Poor little wearied wretches! She pitied them now, almost as if they had been strangers, as she remembered the wearied limbs and blistered feet of long ago, and, like a writing on the wall of her memory, rose up the gilded letters on the marble tablet, surrounded by the sculptured angels, before which the little wanderers had stood in a mute rapture of delight:

"To the memory of ALLEGRA and KATHERINE, twin daughters of Adelbert, Earl of Glenhampton, who died June 21, 18—, aged two years and sixteen days. 'Suffer little children to come unto me, and forbid them not, for of such is the kingdom of heaven!' "

Ever so marvelous is the power of association. During the ten years that had elapsed since that September evening, Rena had never once recalled the monumental inscription to her memory; now it seemed as vivid before her as if she had deciphered it but yesterday.

"Daughters of Adelbert, Earl of Glenhampton! They were Blanche's sisters then!"

She glanced through her drooping eyelashes at the young girl sitting by her side, and longed to ask about the little things so early stricken down, but she never opened her lips.

"It will all come about in due time," she thought; "and I have no wish to be identified, in anybody's mind, with the ragged little pauper of the old time, who tramped through the mud and dust of London streets, and wore the charity-checked aprons of Wykenham Refuge."

"How silent you are, Rena," said Blanche, playfully laying her hand upon the other's shoulder; "and how grave you look!"

"It is all so new and strange to me," said Rena, with a forced smile. "Have we nearly reached Glenhampton?"

"This wall of gray stone on our right, with the vases of hanging trailers on every buttress, is the westernmost boundary of the park; we shall soon be there now. Do you

see yonder shaft of crumbling stone, with the festoons of ivy waving to and fro in the wind?"

"Yes; it looks almost like a monumental pillar."

"It *is* a monument," said Blanche, in a low, earnest voice. "It is all that is left of a pretty little porter's lodge that once stood there—the chimney stack."

"What became of it?" asked Rena, fixing her dark eyes full upon her companion's face, while her heart throbbed violently.

"It was burned to the ground," answered Blanche; "but what gave a terrible interest to the occurrence was that a poor old man and two children, who had sought a temporary refuge in its deserted rooms for that one night, perished also in the flames! No wonder you start and turn pale, Rena; it makes me shudder to think of it, even now, although it must be nearly ten years ago. A few charred and scorched remains were all which we could give Christian burial to. And papa never would allow them to remove the old chimney, around which the ivy had grown, as if it would fain conceal the ghastly ruins of what was once a happy home. And what made it all seem more frightfully horrible was that upon the same night——"

She stopped, for at that moment the carriage rolled under the arched marble gateway, whose clustered pillars were surmounted by carved bass-reliefs, and a gate-house built to correspond, stood back, half-hidden by a majestic growth of evergreens.

A beautiful little Italian grayhound, as white as milk, with a silver collar round his slender throat, bounded into the carriage as it paused momentarily for the gates to be opened, and Blanche caught it up in her arms.

"My pet, my lovely little Pearl!" she exclaimed, hugging and kissing it, while it struggled to lick her face, and uttered shrill cries of delight. "Oh! this seems like home in good earnest."

As she spoke, the Castle came in sight, crowning a majestic elevation all dotted with feathery branched elms and walnut trees of immense size and age, its central dome and gray stone towers catching new beauty from the sunset, and the marble-flagged terrace, from which the broad stone steps led down, decorated with superb orange trees glittering with golden fruit, plumy palms, and acacias, whose mist-like foliage was indigenous to Palestine and Persia. Turning to

the left, the carriage skirted the terraces and rolled up to the grand front, and in an instant Lady Blanche Arden was in her mother's arms.

In the one instant in which she seemed forgotten by both mother and daughter, Rena had a good opportunity to study the face and features of the Countess of Glenhampton, whose stately charms as far excelled the delicate beauty of her young daughter as the golden planet Venus outshines one of the pale Pleiades. The ten years which had elapsed since last she formed one of the *dramatis personæ* of our tale had scarcely left an impress on her beautiful oval face, where the roses of health glowed softly through the cream-white skin.

"Mamma," said Blanche, "this is Rena Percival, my beloved companion, of whom I have so often told you. You must be sure and love her very dearly, for my sake."

"It will be very easy for me to love Blanche's friend," said Lady Glenhampton, with a soft graciousness of manner which was exquisitely captivating. "You are more than welcome at Glenhampton, Miss Percival. Marienne, my maid, shall conduct you to your room at once, for dinner will soon be ready, and you have neither of you much time to dress."

"Rena's room must be near mine, mamma," cried out Lady Blanche, with the fearless imperiousness of a petted and indulged child.

"I believe Mrs. Wadesleigh has assigned to her the rose-rooms, just beyond yours, my child."

Lady Blanche executed a pirouette of delight.

"How nice!" she exclaimed. "I knew dear old Wadesleigh would have things just to suit me, and there's a door communicating between the two boudoirs, Rena. Won't it be splendid?"

But Rena scarcely heard what she said; a feeling of dizzy bewilderment racked her brain as Lady Glenhampton led her down the grand circular hall, with its dome of deep-blue glass above, sprinkled with stars of gold, and the flowers, and pictures, and bending statues around.

"Oh, what a beautiful painting!" she exclaimed, stopping short before an old representation of the Madonna which hung over one of the pillared door-ways. "It seems to me as if I had somewhere seen it before.

"There are several copies of it, I believe," said the countess; "but this is an orignal which my husband purchased

in a little Italian convent town. I wish Lord Glenhampton were at home; he would be pleased with your appreciation of his pet work of art."

"When is he coming, mamma?" asked Lady Blanche, who was gathering scarlet pomegranate blossoms from a pyramid of bloom and fragrance which occupied the center of the hall.

"Not until October, at least," the countess answered. "Doctor Mellin thinks the air of the Continent agrees so much better with him at this season of the year that he has concluded to remain here at present."

"Come, Rena," said Lady Blanche, passing her arm through that of her companion, as the latter still lingered before the dove-eyed Madonna, whose sad face looked with such an expression of human love and longing from the dusky darkness of the canvas. "Has the picture fascinated you?"

"No," said Rena, turning away with almost an effort; "but somehow it seems to me as if my own mother must have looked like that."

Lady Glenhampton glanced kindly at her.

"Can you remember your mother, my dear?" she asked. "Blanche tells me that you are an orphan?"

"I suppose I cannot remember, but I am always trying to picture her face to myself," answered Rena, gravely.

The trim-looking, little French waiting-maid, whom Lady Glenhampton called Marienne, had opened a door, supported by white and gold pilasters, above which were wreathed gold vine-leaves and clusters of white grapes.

"These are the apartments of mademoiselle," she said, with a courtesy, and Blanche left her with a kiss.

"Marienne will take care of you," she said; "and I will come for you when I am dressed."

Rena followed the maid across a tiny vestibule, carpeted with rose-colored velvet and hung with pink silk, fringed with silver, in a suite of rooms communicating with each other—boudoir, bedroom, and dressing-room, with a small anteroom adjoining. Lady Glenhampton had called them the rose-rooms, and Rena understood why, as she stood looking round. The carpets were of pink velvet, the window draperies of pink and silver, and the walls tinted of the faintest rose-color, like the last delicate reflections of a mid-

summer sunset, while the furniture, of white, enameled wood, was covered with pink brocatelle.

"I shall feel as if I lived inside of a rose's heart here," Rena thought to herself, as she breathed in the delicious odor of flower-baskets on ivory brackets, and saw the green foliage of the many elms through the open window, with the river Medway shining far away like a sheet of molten silver.

Marienne's voice broke on the current of Rena's thoughts, or rather impressions, as she stood surveying her new quarters.

"Will mademoiselle please to give me her keys," she asked, "so that I can unpack a dinner dress?"

A momentary flush of mortification rose to Rena Percival's cheek. She had as much moral courage as most girls, but she did shrink from the idea of submitting her poor little trunk and bandbox to the inspection of Mademoiselle Marienne's eye. The words, "You may go—I would rather unpack my things myself!" rose to her lips, but, ere they were spoken, she caught the curious, wondering expression of the girl's eyes raised to hers. No—it would not do to risk comment and gossip among the servants; she must keep up her dignity at all hazards, and, drawing her two keys from her pocket, she handed them loftily to the maid, as if it were quite an every-day affair for her to accept the services of a French maid.

Marienne moved noiselessly to and fro, putting the things away in a wardrobe-bureau and dressing-closet, while Rena washed the dust of travel from her head and face, and wondered within herself what the next ceremonial would be.

"I have laid out the blue silk dress for mademoiselle," said Marienne's soft voice close to her ear, "and if I may be allowed to arrange her hair——"

Rena sat down abruptly in the chair Marienne had drawn up in the mirror-walled dressing-room, and allowed the French girl's skillful hands to take down, brush out, and rearrange her masses of dark hair.

"Mademoiselle has splendid hair," said Marienne, smoothing out the long tresses with a loving touch, as if she delighted in their luxuriance, "almost as much as my lady. Mademoiselle will need no false braids."

And Rena scarcely knew herself in Marienne's artistic

chevelure, with the broad braids drooping behind her ears, and a white japonica, which the maid summoned a servant to cut from the greenhouse, nestling among them, while two or three long, silky curls rippled over her shoulders on either side. Her blue silk dress, trimmed with white lace, was exceedingly becoming to her, and her fair, white shoulders gleamed like pearl from the white lace shawl which Marienne had festooned over one arm and under the other, while the little slippers made her foot look even smaller than its natural proportions.

"Is there anything more I can do before my Lady Blanche comes?" Marienne asked, with polite deference.

"Nothing more," Rena answered. "You may go now, Marienne."

The French maid had hardly closed the door behind her when Rena sprang to her feet and bounded across the room with all the girlish gayety and abandon she had perforce repressed during the presence of the trim little servitress. She turned round and round in the circle of mirrors, bursting into dignified smiles in the happy consciousness of her own beauty.

"I never looked half so pretty before!" she thought. "Oh, if I could only have a French maid to dress me always!"

Lady Blanche came in presently, dressed in simple white, with roses in her hair, and turquoise ornaments.

"How lovely you look, dear Rena," she said. "Nature has made a mistake in us. You ought to be the earl's daughter instead of I!"

"Nonsense!" said Rena, twining her arms about her friend's waist, but with a pretty consciousness of her own bright, flower-like beauty, nevertheless, as they went down stairs to join Lady Glenhampton in the west drawing-rooms.

Almost as they entered the apartment, a tall footman in a livery of brown and gold, with varnished pumps, glistening white silk stockings and a powdered head, as if he were prematurely old, appeared at an opposite threshold, announcing in a studiously lowered tone the words:

"Dinner is served, my lady!"

"Unfortunately," said Lady Glenhampton, turning to her young companion with a smile, "we have no gentleman to escort us to dinner to-night. Ernest has written that he

is coming down next week, Blanche, with some of his young friends, so it will be less dull for you."

"I am never dull, mamma," said Blanche, quietly.

"But Miss Percival may be," and without pausing to hear Rena's disclaimer, the countess led the way into the great dining-room, where there was glass and silver, and hot-house flowers, and table-room enough to seat thirty people, with a tall footman, the very duplicate of the gentleman who had announced the meal, behind each chair, and a silver-haired butler at the sideboard, watching his subordinates with an argus eye.

Rena Percival had not yet taken the crimson velvet chair with oaken Gothic back and wide, hospitable arms which was obviously indicated to her by the white-haired old butler, when the door at the farther end of the long room swung slowly open, revolving noiselessly upon its plaited hinges, and something glided in which made the young girl start and thrill as if she had suddenly beheld a supernatural visitant from the world of dreams, and shadows, and unreal things.

CHAPTER XII.

MISS CLIVE.

It was a woman's figure, tall and very slender, dressed in the deepest and most somber black, of some heavy material, which fell in straight folds from her shoulders to her feet, save where a black cord and tassel girded it around her waist, after a fashion as antique as it was unbecoming. Her hands, long and slender, with taper fingers, on one of which gleamed the only ornament she wore, a heavy circlet of gold, where the wedding ring is usually placed, hung listlessly by her side, and she moved with a slow, gliding motion, that resembled undulation rather than walking, while her face, absolutely colorless as the whitest of marble, had a set rigidity in every lineament, and her hair, very long and thick, was not confined or bound up in any way but streamed down her back. But its color was more remarkable even than the style in which it was worn—a pale, lusterless gold, or flaxen, thickly threaded with white, although the delicate grain of her skin, and the unwrinkled smoothness of her forehead bore witness to the fact that she was not a middle-aged woman. Her eyes, of a light, glassy blue, had the peculiar, unseeing expression which we attribute to somnambulists, except when she fixed them full on some object directly before her, when a quivering sapphire light would seem to flow into them, and her intentness of gaze would be almost startling.

Rena turned an eager, inquiring gaze toward Lady Blanche as this strange apparition glided into the room.

"It is Miss Clive, my old governess," said Blanche, and she ran to throw her arms around the black-robed figure and cover the pale lips with kisses, leading her up to the new-comer as she did so.

"Rena, this is Miss Clive, mamma's dearest friend," she said, "and, Miss Clive, this is Miss Rena Percival, my dearest friend!"

Rena had difficulty to prevent herself from shuddering as the cold hand lay for a instant in her own like that of a corpse, and the colorless lips murmured a few conventional words of greeting. Then Miss Clive took her seat next to Lady Glenhampton, and dinner began. Rena could not help seeing that the strange-looking woman was as excep-

tional in her diet as in other things, making her meal off a crust of bread and a glass of ice-water, although the table was loaded with every delicacy of the season. Her eyes kept returning with a species of fascination to the corpse-like face, although she was much embarrassed once or twice when Miss Clive, suddenly raising her eyes, encountered the curious gaze of her new acquaintance.

"You need not blush so deeply, Miss Percival," she said with a smile, when this had happened more than once. "I am accustomed to being looked at, as if I were a curiosity!"

"I beg your pardon," began Rena, coloring more deeply than ever; "I did not intend——"

"It is scarcely worth your while to apologize," said Miss Clive, abruptly. "You are young, and I can read in your face that you have a kind heart. I shall take no offense at your regards."

Rena Percival was considerably relieved when the ceremonious and long-protracted meal drew to a close, and she accompanied Lady Blanche out into the purple darkness of the late August evening, where the lights from the drawing-room windows fell across their way as they paced arm in arm up and down the marble pavement of the broad terrace.

"Dear Blanche," she said, eagerly, "tell me about that Miss Clive. Why does she dress so strangely and look so marble white? And why does she stare at you as if she were blind, and speak always in that low tone, almost beneath her breath? Is she crazy?"

She spoke the last word in a whisper, drawing closer to Lady Blanche as she did so.

"Crazy?—no," answered Lady Blanche; "but I sometimes wonder that she is not. Only think, dear Rena—she was out walking in this very park nine—no, ten years ago, and came suddenly upon the corpse of her murdered lover—the man to whom she was to have been married the next day."

"How dreadful!" said Rena, shuddering. "But, who murdered him, Blanche?"

"We never knew. He had not an enemy in the world that people were aware of, and there was nothing stolen, so that the deed could not have been committed for the sake of greed of gain. I was with her at the time—a little creature, scarcely more than a baby—and I can just remember hear-

ing her piercing scream, and seeing the dead face pillowed in the grass and fern as if it were asleep, except for the wide open glassy eyes. He is buried in St. Hilda's churchyard, and Miss Clive goes every day, rain or shine, summer or winter, to lay a wreath of fresh flowers upon his grave."

"It sounds like a romance," said Rena, thoughtfully.

"It is like a romance," said Lady Blanche. "She has made it the business of her life to discover and track out the man who murdered Mr. Hunsworth—that was her lover's name—and I believe she thinks and dreams of nothing else by day or night. Mamma calls it a monomania; she has striven by every possible means to distract her attention and win her thoughts away from the one all-absorbing topic, but it is quite useless. She never goes away from home, but she is in communication by letter with every police detective in England or on the Continent."

"I should be afraid of her."

"No, you would not; she is too gentle for that. Besides, I have known her all my life, and I believe she was mamma's friend before she married my father. Mamma was a young widow then, without much money."

"Has your mother been married twice?" asked Rena.

"To be sure. Didn't you know that Ernest was not my own brother?"

"How should I know it, you unreasonable Blanche, when you have never told me?"

Lady Blanche Arden laughed out merrily in the twilight.

"Perhaps I took it for granted that you ought to know by instinct!" she replied. "But Ernest is Captain Evelyn, and, you know, had he been papa's son, he would have been Lord Ernest Arden."

"I am not so well posted in the peerage as you," retorted Rena. "However, I dare say the aristocratic atmosphere of this splendid old castle, will find its way through my dullness after a while, so that I shall not prove quite incorrigible! So, this Miss Clive used to be your governess?"

"Mine and Ernest's too. We were very fond of her, and still are, for that matter, although she never assumed any charge of us after Mr. Hunsworth's terrible death. She had a brain fever then, and, even after her recovery, it was months before she recovered her usual health and strength, either bodily or mentally. She lives here partly because mamma loves her so dearly, and partly because the murder

was committed within the domains of Glenhampton Park. My father considers her as a sort of sacred charge bequeathed to his care and protection. But the most startling coincidence of it all is what I began to tell you, when we were driving in, and Pearlie jumped so unceremoniously into my lap—that Mr. Hunsworth was murdered on the same night that the lodge burned down."

"Do you suppose there could have been any connection between the two events?" asked Rena.

"I believe it was thought not, at the time; but the whole thing was enwrapped in so much mystery, that nothing could be clearly made out. There is mamma calling us; she thinks we have been out long enough with the fire-flies and the deer. You must play for mamma, Rena, when we go in; she is passionately fond of music."

At Lady Blanche's request, Rena went at once to the piano, where they joined Lady Glenhampton and Miss Clive in the drawing-room, and played some of Beethoven's grandest music with a brilliancy of execution and delicacy of touch that surprised the countess, who had looked for nothing more than the ordinary proficiency of a schoolgirl.

"Well, mamma," cried Lady Blanche, triumphantly, when Rena had been warmly thanked for her music, and had retired to her own rooms to seek the slumber she so much needed, "what do you think of my friend, Rena Percival? Isn't she all that I represented her?"

"She's very beautiful, my love, and very attractive," answered Lady Glenhampton, "and she will prove a charming companion for you, I have no doubt. What do you say, Antonia?" turning to Miss Clive, who sat motionless by the piano.

"I like her looks," said Miss Clive, quietly. "There is something of a resemblance between her and Blanche. Did not you perceive it, Edith?"

Lady Glenhampton smiled with a little complacent superiority.

"They are both dark complexioned, and nearly of a height, that is all. I scarcely think that any one would discover a genuine likeness between this young girl, who is destined one day to earn her own living, in a subordinate capacity, and Lord Glenhampton's only daughter."

"Nevertheless, they do look alike," said Miss Clive, with calm persistency.

"Except that I am not half so pretty as Rena," said Lady Blanche, with the ingenuous championship of a schoolgirl's affection.

Lady Glenhampton smiled again, as she passed her hand fondly over Blanche's graceful head.

"I prefer my own little daughter," she said.

"But you will love Rena, mamma, for my sake?"

"For your sake, dear, yes. Now go to bed, for you have had a long and fatiguing day, and I don't want you to look pale and fagged out when Ernest comes home."

In the meantime, Rena Percival, left at last to her slumbers by Mademoiselle Marienne, who had insisted on unbraiding and brushing out her hair, putting away all the garments she had worn, and even laying out her pretty embroidered night dress, lay among her lace trimmed pillows, musing upon the new atmosphere into which she had so suddenly descended, as it were, from a world that seemed almost to belong to another sphere.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE HAUNTED TOWER.

"Blanche! Blanche! are you up yet?"

"I haven't even thought of such a thing," answered a drowsy voice from Lady Blanche Arden's pillows. "It's so delightful not to be roused by the clang of that hideous school-bell, but to lie in bed just as long as one wishes. Come in, Rena, and tell me what has made you rise with the robins."

And she threw her arms affectionately around the neck of the beautiful young girl who stood there in her white wrapper and blue ribbons, as fresh as the glowing summer morning's self.

"Curiosity, I suppose," said Rena, returning the caress with interest; "though, by the way, your ornithological knowledge—Miss Trowbridge isn't here to correct me, if I make a mistake in pronouncing the big words—is in error. The robins have been up warbling their little hearts out, ay, and the larks and thrushes, too, these four hours."

"What do you mean by curiosity?" asked Lady Blanche, sitting up in bed, and ringing the bell for her attendant.

"Didn't you promise last night, you forgetful Blanche, that you would take me all over the Castle to-day, and show me the marvels thereof, including the family ghost?"

"But I didn't say before breakfast; and besides," added Blanche, gravely, "the family ghost, if there is one, never gets up until everybody else has gone to bed!"

"If!" cried Rena; "as if there could be any doubt on the subject. Every respectable old family in England ought to have a ghost! Come, Blanche, don't be lazy; remember what a pitch my expectations are wrought up to!"

"I shall have to send for Dame Wadesleigh and the keys," said Blanche, doubtfully. "I don't think I could find the way through all the corridors in the towers myself unless I had a compass along."

"Send for her then, at once!"

And Lady Blanche found herself borne resistlessly along in the current of Rena Percival's ardor and determination.

Mrs. Wadesleigh, who was deep in the mysteries of pre-

serving, down stairs, willingly delegated her duties to an upper servant, and changing her gingham gown for one of black stuff more suited to the dignity of a cicerone, possessed herself of an enormous key basket, and prepared to attend the young ladies on their journey of inspection.

"There's no place in the country so well worth seeing as Glenhampton Castle," she said, complacently adjusting her frilled cap-borders, "and so the visitors all say, although my lady doesn't like to have the castle shown when she is at home——"

"And thereby you miss many half crowns, I suppose?" said Lady Blanche.

"You are wrong there, Lady Blanche," said Mrs. Wadesleigh, "for your mamma is good enough to allow the picture-gallery and the grand saloon and the conservatories to be thrown open to visitors every Tuesday and Friday."

"It's very fortunate for us then that this is Saturday," observed Lady Blanche, "as there is no knowing how many cockney tourists, or sight-seeing bridal couples we might encounter on the great stairway."

Mrs. Wadesleigh led the way through a marble paved court to the chapel, once used as a place of worship by the Glenhamptons of a century ago, but now merely an ornamental accessory to the castle. The young girls stood in silence, scarcely hearing Mrs. Wadesleigh's voluble descriptions. Somehow the solemn influences of the spot checked their girlish mirth, and they were not sorry to be conducted into the tapestry-hung rooms adjoining, draped with embroideries, which still glowed brilliantly, though the fingers of the high-born dames who had wrought the silken buds and blossoms had long moldered into dust; the picture-gallery, with its floor of waxed oaken boards, and dome of white glass overhead; the library with its gothic cases filled with rare and costly volumes, and the frescoed ceilings, the work of an ancient artist of repute; and the series of reception-rooms, by which the grand saloon was approached, were all visited, in their turn, and Mrs. Wadesleigh was about to proceed to the upper apartments of the castle when Rena interposed. "But the ghost! I haven't seen the ghost yet!"

"It's the eastern tower as is said to be 'aunted, miss," said the housekeeper, whose language, generally correct and appropriate enough, invariably became confused as to "h's"

when she assumed the duties of a guide to any one who desired to see Glenhampton Castle. "It's the ghost of Lady Beatrix Arden, who died the night afore her bridal, and was said to be murdered by the jealousy of her younger sister as loved the gentleman, too, and walks, half dressed in black, with her 'air streamin' down her back, and a red gash h'across her throat——"

"Hush, hush, Wadesleigh!" interrupted Lady Blanche, with a slight shiver; "what absurd nonsense all that is!"

"Habsurd or not habsurd, my lady," said Mrs. Wadesleigh, somewhat affronted. "I've spoken with them as has seen the happarition there themselves!"

"But you never saw it yourself?"

"No. But that's no reason why I never shall, my lady."

She was leading the way across the oblong gallery which connects the modern portion of the castle with the frowning turrets of the eastern tower, whose square, glowing proportions, destitute of the least effort at ornament, contrasted strongly with the elaborate architecture of the former.

"This is the hapartment," she said, in a low tone, as she fitted a huge rusty-looking key into its niche, "where Mr. Hunsworth's corpse was took, when they brought it in, and——"

She uttered a loud shriek, and nearly fell back upon the girls, for as the great door swung slowly back, a tall, black figure swept across the twilight darkness of the shuttered room, and vanished at the opposite door.

"It's the ghost! it's the ghost!" she gasped. "Oh, Lady Blanche! them as doubts the supernatural halways has hawful warnin's! You'll believe me now; but I do 'ope it don't mean no ill-luck to the family."

"Nonsense!" said Lady Blanche, courageously, although Rena stood still, with a pale cheek and a beating heart; "it s only Miss Clive. Mamma says she often comes here to the place where her lover lay before his remains were committed to the burial-ground."

"She must ha' come through the keyhole, then," said Mrs. Wadesleigh, incredulously, "for I keeps the keys in my own room, safe and secure, where no mortal bein' could get at 'em."

"She has a key to the little postern—that's how it happens. No, no, Wadesleigh, your ghost won't bear inspection."

"But what made her glide away like she was afraid of livin' creaturs?" still persisted the housekeeper.

"She never likes to be seen here. You know how peculiar she is, Wadesleigh."

"It's give me a turn as I shall not get over for a week," panted Mrs. Wadesleigh, putting her plump hand to her side; but Lady Blanche slipped past her, and hurried through the door, beneath whose heavily arched portals the black form had vanished, and Rena followed her.

Swift as thought the two fair young girls hastened down gloomy corridors, past arched gate ways, and out through a postern entrance into the air and sunshine.

Antonia Clive stood there motionless, with her hands folded, and a dark kerchief wrapped round her head.

"Miss Clive," said Blanche, eagerly, "was it you we saw in the octagon room, just now?"

"What brings you young things into this place of gloom and shadows?" Miss Clive demanded, sadly.

"But was it you? Mrs. Wadesleigh, poor old soul, would have it, that it was nothing less than the ghost of Lady Beatrix, who died a hundred years ago."

"It was I," Miss Clive answered, calmly.

"Then I shall go back and spoil the poor old woman's delightful little ghost story," laughed Lady Blanche; and Mrs. Wadesleigh was forced, unwillingly, to abandon her theory of supernatural visitations, so far as that particular morning was concerned.

The countess was sitting at her drawing-room window, as Rena and Blanche returned after their inspection of the Castle.

"Well, Miss Percival," she said, smiling, "have you enjoyed your ramble?' '

"Yes," said Rena, sinking down on a low divan opposite, and letting her roses fall into her lap, "I suppose I have."

"You suppose so?" echoed Lady Glenhampton, somewhat surprised.

"I cannot tell whether it was enjoyment or not," said Rena, pressing her hand to her forehead. "Of course, I admired the beautiful pictures, and marbles, and furniture, but, as I passed through some of those rooms, the strangest sensation would steal over me, almost as if I was walking in a vision. Lady Glenhampton"—with her dark eyes fixed with pleading earnestness on the countess' high-bred fea-

tures—"did you ever dream of a place; and then afterward recognize it when you saw it? I have dreamed of this Castle."

"It is probably the force of some forgotten association or resemblance," said Lady Glenhampton, with superior wisdom, almost verging upon contempt. "All old castles are more or less alike."

"But I never have seen any old castles except Glenhampton, so that I could not possibly have any associations connected with them."

Lady Glenhampton looked with some curiosity at Rena.

"Tell me about your previous life, my dear," she said, with a sort of languid interest. "My daughter tells me you have spent many years at Miss Hartford's establishment."

"Nearly ten, I believe."

"And where did you live before you came to Hartford Lodge?"

"In London." Rena answered, beginning to grow restless under this courteous cross-questioning.

'To what profession did your father belong?"

"I have no recollection, whatever, of my father," said Rena, beginning to feel uneasy.

"Indeed? And to whose care were you committed?"

"To that of my grandfather.'

"And is he living?"

"No, Lady Glenhampton."

"Have you any other relations than the sister, of whom Blanche has told me?"

Rena shook her head.

"You see, Lady Glenhampton," she said, with a little forced laugh, which betokened annoyance rather than amusement, "you can hardly expect every one to hold up to your inspection a long line of ancestry as complete and unbroken as the family tree of the Glenhamptons."

The countess was a woman of tact, and she asked no more questions.

"Miss Percival has something to conceal," she said to herself; "she does not like to be asked of her previous life. I almost wish Blanche had selected some other of Miss Hartford's pupils to be her friend."

CHAPTER XIV.

VISITORS FROM LONDON.

Rena Percival was sitting at her desk writing a long and circumstantial letter to her sister, Alice, on the evening of the third day after her arrival at Glenhampton Castle, when Lady Blanche came up to her room.

"The post has just come in, my dear," she said, throwing herself into one of the pink satin chairs.

"He has not brought me any letters, I suppose," said Rena, closing her portfolio, with a little sigh, for her friend had evidently come with the intention of having, what Miss Hartford's pupils termed, "a good, old-fashioned chat."

"But he has me, Rena; a nice, long one, from Ernest."

Lady Blanche's cheek was flushed with innocent pleasure, and her soft eyes sparkled like dewy stars.

"And what does Captain Evelyn say?" asked Rena.

"That he will be here to-morrow, without fail, with Mr. Alkenard and Lord Vere Temple."

"And which of them is it in whom you are so vitally interested?" asked Rena, mischievously.

The rose on Lady Blanche's cheek fired into a vivid carmine.

"What makes you think I am interested in either of them?" asked she, laughing.

"Your own tell-tale face, my Blanche. Come—out with it—you know you are hiding a secret away from me, and that is point-blank against the rules and regulations of our friendship!"

"I believe you are a witch, Rena!"

"Of course I am—the only wonder is that you haven't found it out before. Is it Mr. Alkenard?"

"No—it is Lord Vere Temple," said Blanche, coming close to Rena and leaning over her shoulder with caressing touch, so that Rena's penetrating eyes should no longer decipher the sly secret of her heart.

"Are you engaged?"

"Yes—no—I can hardly tell which. It was only a boy and girl love affair when we were both children, but mamma is pleased with him, and I believe Lord Temple, his

father, likes me a little, and so—unless we both change our minds——"

"Aha!" said Rena, pulling down the fair, blushing face, until Blanche's hazel eyes were on a level with her own. "And it is all settled, is it? And you never told me one word about it!"

"Because it was so uncertain, dearest Rena, and I don't think I ought to have told you now—it is Vere's secret more than mine—only you see you found it out."

"Because I am a witch," said Rena, gravely. "Is he handsome?"

"Yes, very—not dark, like you and me, but a regular Saxon face, with gold-brown curls and dark-blue eyes, and sweetest smile you ever saw."

"And is he good enough for my little Blanchette?"

"Too good, Rena," said Blanche, with innocent fervor. "I sometimes fear I am too silly and trifling to make him happy. Oh, if I were as accomplished, and talented, and brilliant as you are, Rena!"

"Blanche," said Rena, gravely, "it's very evident that you are in love."

"I am afraid I am," said Blanche, with the disconcerted air of one convicted in some crime.

"But who is this Mr. Alkenard.

"He is a young barrister, I believe—Ernest's friend. I have never seen him. Mamma says we must get up boating parties and croquet parties, and all sorts of expeditions to amuse them."

"You will be quite enough amusement for Lord Vere Temple, I imagine," said Rena, laughing.

"But the others?"

"Why *I* must try my best to keep them from absolutely dying of *ennui*, that's all."

"I am so glad you are here, Rena, darling," said Blanche, nearly strangling her friend with an enthusiastic hug. "But mamma is talking about dinner parties and a ball, and inviting hosts of parties from neighboring places. Mamma is so fond of Ernest."

Lady Blanche accompanied her mother on a round of visits that afternoon. and Rena stood on the steps to see them drive away, her lovely lips wreathed in smiles as she wished them a pleasant journey.

But the smiles died away as the horses dashed round

the graveled lawn and disappeared beneath the drooping elm branches which overhung the broad swoop of the avenue.

"Lady Glenhampton does not ask *me* to go," she thought, with a bitter curl to her lips. "She does not think I am a fitting person to introduce to the county familes; and when Blanche, in the innocent kindness of her heart, asked me to accompany them, my lady put on that hollow society smile of hers, and 'feared it would be a very uninteresting drive to Miss Percival!' I wonder if it ever occurred to her ladyship that it would be better to make a friend rather than an enemy, even of an embryo governess! Wait a while, my Lady Glenhampton; perhaps my turn may come next!"

With these bitter reflections corroding her heart, Rena Percival put on her white-ribboned hat, and walked out into the green and shady recesses of the park, for she felt as if the confinement of four walls would suffocate her.

"It is a relief to be alone, at least," she thought, with a sort of passionate resentment at her heart.

But even this poor consolation was to be denied her, it seemed; for in the greenest and coolest and most secluded recess of the park, close to the wire fence over which the dappled deer, who had never been taught to fear the apparition of humanity, came and peeped at her with shy, liquid eyes and quivering nostrils, she came suddenly upon a gentleman walking slowly along, with his broad-brimmed straw hat in his hand, so that the fresh breeze could fan his forehead.

He was tall, with dark hair and eyes, and a slight, well-made-figure, and at the first glance Rena could hardly tell whether he was old, young, or middle-aged.

"I beg your pardon," he said, with polished courtesy, as she involuntarily started. "I hope I have not alarmed Miss Percival."

So he knew who she was.

Rena took courage and looked him full in the face.

"Are you Captain Evelyn?" she asked, with a sudden thought that the travelers might possibly have arrived sooner than they had expected.

"I have not that honor," he said, with a smile. "I am only Mr. Poynings, the family lawyer, of whom you have, perhaps, heard the ladies at the Castle speak."

"Yes," said Rena, recalling one or two casual allusions which she had heard.

"I hope Lady Blanche and the countess are quite well?" he asked.

"Quite, I believe—thank you."

"I had intended to call ere this," said Mr. Poynings, walking along by her side, "but we business men are not always masters of our own time. Perhaps this afternoon——"

"They are not at home," interrupted Rena, rather brusquely; "they have both gone out to pay visits this afternoon."

"In that case, I must postpone the pleasure until some other time," said Mr. Poynings, smoothly. "But pardon the seeming impertinence of the question, Miss Percival. I hope you are not lost in them labyrinths of sylvan paths. Are you aware of how far you have strayed from the Castle?"

"I know it is some distance," said Rena, independently; "but I wanted a good long walk. Which path will take me with most directness to the house?"

"If you are not well acquainted with the vicarage, I don't know whether I could tell you with sufficient accuracy," returned Mr. Poynings. "Will you allow me the pleasure of becoming your guide—for a part of the way, at least."

"I do not wish to trouble you," said Rena, in a tone which evidently meant: "I wish you would be good enough to mind your own business."

But Mr. Poynings chose only to accept the surface signification of the words.

"It will not be the least trouble," he said, blandly; "on the contrary, I shall regard it as a pleasure. I suppose from the question you first asked me," he added, as they walked along, "that Captain Evelyn is soon expected down from London?"

"Yes—with Mr. Alkenard and Lord Vere Temple."

Mr. Poynings' natural complexion appeared to be pale, but a curious flush rose to his cheek bones as she spoke, and a peculiar cast in one of his eyes, gone almost as soon as it had appeared, gave a momentarily unpleasant expression to his face.

"He dislikes one of them," thought Rena. "I wonder

which it is? It's always useful to be in possession of other people's secrets."

He walked with her as far as the foot of the terrace, making himself exceedingly agreeable in spite of the first impression Miss Percival received of his presence. But Rena believed in first impressions—she was not often mistaken in them, and she was a skillful reader of the faces of others.

"He talks well," she thought, as she entered the house, "but I shall not like Mr. Poynings!"

She took the opportunity to ask Blanche about him when next they were together alone.

"Mr. Poynings!" cried Blanche. "How funny that you should have come across him in that romantic sort of a way! Don't be vexed, Rena dear; but suppose—only suppose he should be your future fate! The young people always meet in that fashion in novels, you know!"

"As if *I* would stoop to a village lawyer!" said Rena, haughtily.

"But he's very nice, Rena, and has a very respectable income, and is one of mamma's prime favorites. He was poor Mr. Hunsworth's clerk or partner, or something, and succeeded to the whole of his business, and mamma has recommended him to a great many of the county families."

"He cannot be very young," said Rena, still disdainful.

"But he is very gentlemanly and intelligent!" persisted Blanche. "Darling Rena, I hope I have not vexed you."

"What a ridiculous idea!" said Rena, laughing, and fully recovering her equanimity. "Yes, he is gentlemanly and intelligent, and he is coming to call on you. Now tell me about the people you saw and the places you went to."

But while Blanche talked, Rena's wandering thoughts were busy with the future visitors—what they would be like, whether they would admire her own piquant beauty, whether their presence would but infuse new brightness into this beautiful life at Glenhampton Castle! And she answered Blanche at random, and hardly knew when the young daughter of the house went back into her own rooms.

She made Marienne arrange her hair over and over again the next afternoon, until that damsel was nearly in despair, and finally tore it all down itself, brushed and coiled it back, after the simplest fashion, with a cluster of natural curls hanging on one side.

"But, mademoiselle, that is not fashionable!" pleaded Marienne.

"No matter; it is becomming. Now give me the white dress, and that is all I shall want of you."

For Rena Percival had decided that in her case "beauty unadorned adorned the most," and she judged rightly. She was a skillful little diplomatist in her way, moreover, and she had resolved to see the new-comers before she herself was seen, so she remained in her own room until toward sunset, and then sauntered leisurely down into the west drawing-room, where windows commanded a view of one end of the terrace and the grounds below.

Yes, the expected guests had arrived. Rena saw the group clustered beneath the shadow of a Venetian awning, as she stood behind the sweep of the lace curtains. Lady Glenhampton, in her exquisite wine-colored silk, and lace scarf, the jewels flashing on her arms and brow, stood talking to a slight young man with blonde mustache and closely cut hair. Mr. Hugh Alkenard, Rena decided it must be, for Lady Blanche sat on a garden seat beyond with a young gentleman, whose personal appearance coincided in every particular with the description she had given of Lord Vere Temple, hanging over her after a very devoted fashion, and she instantly recognized, from his resemblance to Lady Glenhampton, the handsome youth who leaned against a pillar, with raven black hair, jetty eyelashes, and a face of almost effeminate beauty.

"He is the handsomest of them all," Rena inwardly decided.

She sat down in an attitude so graceful that one would scarcely have dreamed how elaborately she had studied it, and opened a blue and gold volume of poems—a sort of excuse for the dreamy reverie into which she allowed herself to subside.

Rena Percival was not naturally a schemer, but the world has not sufficient charity for those who are obliged to fight their own battles. How often did she look at innocent Blanche Arden with an actual feeling of envy for the position which placed her so far above the plotting and planning which she herself scorned, even while she was forced to practice it. Since she could remember, the truism had always been impressed on her mind, over and over again,

that she had her own way to make in the world. And now who could consistently blame her for her best to make it.

Consequently when Captain Evelyn came in, followed by the rest of the group, the beautiful young girl, gazelle-eyed and features like a Circassian damsel, who reclined so gracefully upon the white silk sofa, with her book lying in her lap, struck upon his vision almost like some supernaturally lovely tableaux.

"I beg your pardon," he said, receding somewhat awkwardly, yet with the chivalrous respect he might have awarded to a royal princess, "I—I wasn't aware my mother had a visitor."

"Don't tread so cruelly on my toes, you stupid Ernest," said Lady Blanche, laughing merrily, "but let me come in, so that I can introduce you to my dear friend, Miss Percival. Rena, this is my brother, Captain Evelyn, and these are his friends, Mr. Alkenard and Lord Vere Temple."

And Rena received them with as much grace and self-possession as if she had been in the habit of daily consorting with eldest sons of viscounts, officers in Her Majesty's dragoons and London barristers. Captain Evelyn, evidently struck with the beauty of his sister's friend, sat down beside her and commenced an animated conversation at once, his face lighting up with a new expression totally different from the languor which had characterized his features up to that time.

Lady Glenhampton noticed it all, even while she was talking with her customary vivacity to Mr. Alkenard, and she bit her scarlet lower lip.

"I had no idea the little serpent was so dangerous," said she to herself, "but I believe Ernest is too well seasoned with the atmosphere of London ball-rooms to allow himself to be drawn into a flirtation with a girl who is destined to be a governess. Let her amuse him while she is here—it cannot be for long."

"Ernest," said the countess' soft voice, during a momentary pause in the conversation, "I have promised you for to-morrow."

"Who is to be the lessee, mother?" asked her son, with a slight elevation of his handsome black eyebrows.

"Lady Barrington is to have a croquet party at The Oaks, and she counts on my young people to swell her number of players."

"Croquet is a bore," said Captain Evelyn, "but in agreeable society——"

"Stella Barrington has grown very handsome," observed Lady Glenhampton, "and Miss Armitage is to be there also."

"In that case," yawned Captain Evelyn, "it will probably be endurable."

Mr. Poynings, who had been invited by the countess to join their party at dinner, came in at that moment, and his presence created a sort of diversion, during which Lady Barrington and her croquet party were forgotten for the time being. And Rena discovered that even while surrounded by the young Londoners, fresh from a society which is supposed to be the cream of the civilized world, Mr. Poynings could and did make himself marvelously agreeable."

"Am I mistaken," said Rena, in a low voice, to Captain Evelyn, after the dessert had been placed on the table, "or does Mr. Poynings really admire your sister Blanche?"

Captain Evelyn stared at her in amazement.

"Because he seems so devoted to her," Rena added, innocently.

"Certainly not," said Captain Evelyn, drawing himself up with hauteur. "I should like to see Poynings presume to admire Lady Blanche Arden. Why the man is nothing but an attorney!"

"Mr. Alkenard is only a barrister."

"But there's a difference, you know; and Alkenard is connected with the Alkenards of Nottinghampshire, one of the best families in England. You are mistaken, Miss Percival. Poynings is a very nice sort of a fellow, and received a good deal into society around here, but he never would dream of such a piece of pretension. That insinuating manner of his is natural to him; he would be just as courteous to old Wadesleigh, if she happened to sit next to him at dinner."

"I am so unaccustomed to society," said Rena, with artful simplicity, "and you must pardon me if I have said anything terrible. It takes me so long to understand the artificial distinctions you great people have."

"Do you call yourself a little people, then?" asked Captain Evelyn, much amused.

"Very little, indeed; so little that your mother and Blanche oddly tolerate me out of kindness."

She looked up at him with soft, appealing eyes, and Captain Evelyn thought, with a tumultuous throb at his heart, what a very charming girl this friend of his sister was.

Rena read in his face the impression she had succeeded in making, and her spirit inwardly rejoiced.

"We will see whether I cannot be quits with you yet, my Lady Glenhampton," she thought to herself. "I wonder if he has much property of his own, though, of course, the son of the Countess of Glenhampton cannot be a poor man."

The reader will perceive that Rena Percival's scheming propensities were in full flower even at this early period of her contact with the great maneuvering world.

"What shall you wear to-morrow, Rena?" asked Blanche, when, as usual, she came to her friend's room, after the drawing-room circle had broken up for the night.

"I do not think I shall go," Rena answered.

"Not go! Dear Rena, why not?"

Rena was silent for an instant; she could not grieve Blanche's affectionate heart by saying to her, "Your mother has not invited me to be of the party."

"Blanche," she said, "you know all these people are strangers to me. I would rather not go out much until I become better acquainted in the neighborhood."

"But this is the only way to become acquainted," pleaded Blanche.

"No matter, I would rather not go."

And not all Blanche's entreaties and expostulations could induce her to swerve from the settled determination.

Lady Glenhampton had laid her plans with systematic foresight to exclude Miss Percival from the croquet party. She had not even acquainted Lady Barrington with the fact that her daughter had a friend staying with her—but when, the next day, Lord Vere Temple was prevented from accompanying the rest by a severe nervous headache, she could not help being a little amazed.

"Miss Percival," she said, sweetly, "would you oblige me by copying out this piece of manuscript music to-day? I have promised it to a friend of mine in London by this evening's mail, and unless you will kindly give me the benefit of your skill, I fear I shall be unable to keep my

word. I know it will be exceedingly tedious, but you are so kind."

"I will do it with the greatest pleasure, dear Lady Glenhampton," said Rena, looking up into the countess' face with the sweetest of smiles. "I am very fond of copying music, and it will serve to pass away the long day while you are gone."

And Lady Glenhampton, secretly rejoicing that she had invented such an excellent pretext for keeping her daughter's friend occupied in her own room all day, never once imagined that those dark eyes read all her thoughts and fancies as completely as if they were written out on paper before her.

Lady Glenhampton had scarcely given Miss Percival credit for the ingenuity and determination of her real character.

"It's no end of a bore your having a headache to-day, Temple," said Captain Evelyn, as he stood in his friend's apartment lighting a perfumed cigarette, "and I've a great mind to stay at home with you."

"By no means," said Lord Vere, earnestly. "I am better by myself—these things always wear away toward evening, and I shouldn't be surprised if I joined you yet."

"Honestly," said Captain Evelyn, with the cigarette in his mouth, "I don't believe the sport will pay for the candle so far as the croquet party is concerned."

"But Lady Glenhampton wishes it, and a man must pay some attention to the exigencies of society. Go along; they are calling you, and there's no sense in your standing dawdling here."

And while Lord Vere Temple lay on the sofa in a darkened room, dozing and meditating by turns, until the sharp pains in his brow grew less and less frequent, Rena Percival was working away in her own apartment with a rapidity which was born of natural efficiency added to great practice. She had copied all the music needed at Hartford Lodge, and thus acquired a skill which was advantageous at this moment, and by the middle of the afternoon she succeeded in triumphantly completing the scores which Lady Glenhampton had confidently allotted to her as a full day's work.

"There," thought Rena, as she flung aside the pen, and threw the drooping black ringlets aside from her forehead.

"All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy. I've finished my work, and now for the play."

She arranged her hair after the most becomingly unconscious fashion, belted her white dress with a crimson silk cord, and went down into the library, whither, about an hour previously, she had heard footsteps languidly descending.

Lord Vere Temple, lounging in a leather covered armchair, over a folio volume of mediæval engravings, started at the sight of such an apparition of beauty and freshness.

She hesitated an instant, with charming uncertainty; but Lord Vere rose at once.

"Don't let me frighten you away, Miss Percival," he said. "If you knew what stupid company I was for myself, you would begin by pitying me, and end by staying to bear me companionship."

"I came for a book," said Rena; "I did not know you were here."

"That is not a very special compliment to me," he said, his eyes fixed with involuntary admiration on her beautiful face.

"But I meant I was not aware you were well enough to come down."

"My head is better, thanks, and solitude is my complaint just at present. Suppose you remain to act the part of physician."

He drew forward a low, luxuriously cushioned chair as he he spoke, and Rena seated herself, as if the question really were not worth her while to debate any longer.

"But you have not told me yet why you are not with the rest of the croquet players," he said, as he resumed his armseat.

Rena raised her soft, liquid eyes to his face with a glance half deprecation, half appeal.

"Shall I tell you the real reason?" she asked.

"Of course."

"But I don't know whether I ought to."

"I absolve you from all doubts at once. Let us have the 'real reason.'"

"Lady Glenhampton did not ask me."

"Not ask you!" he echoed, in surprise.

"Perhaps I ought not to have expected it," Rena added,

with a pretty assumption of candor; "but—but it *is* hard to be excluded from the pleasures in which all others participate. I dare say I shall get used to it in time, however."

And she sighed—a sigh as soft and low as the echo of a rose-freighted zephyr, and let her lovely eyes droop a trifle more.

"But Blanche? Surely she——"

"Blanche was anxious that I should go. Blanche is all kindness and generosity. She has not yet learned the world's hollow lesson of expediency; but I could not go on her invitation. Nay," she added, with a smile, "do not look so annoyed, or I shall be sorry I told you. I am not an earl's daughter, and perhaps it is better that I should learn at once the place I am destined to occupy in the world."

The *role* of gentle resignation was infinitely becoming to Miss Percival, and Lord Vere Temple being a man with mortal susceptibilities and sensations, could not help thinking how wondrously pretty this injured beauty was.

"I can't understand Lady Glenhampton's policy," he said, after a moment's silence, "but I, at least, ought to be very thankful for any circumstance that has procured me the pleasure of companionship like yours."

And Miss Percival, as she could do whenever she chose to attempt it, made herself an exceedingly charming companion, so much so that the hours crept away without Lord Vere being aware of the progress of time, and when, just at nightfall, Lady Glenhampton, who was the first of the returned party to seek out the invalid of the morning, entered the library, she was struck dumb with astonishment and indignation to see him comfortably seated on the sofa, with a volume of engravings in his lap, on which were drooping the dark curls of Miss Rena Percival.

CHAPTER XV.

THE RECTORY OF TREGARVAN.

The midday sun was shining gloriously over the range of hills, which slope precipitously down to one of the loveliest sea-coasts on all the Cardiganshire shore, when the rude, yet not uncomfortable, jaunting-car, which had met Alice Percival at the obscure railway station, rumbled up to Tregarvan Rectory, a long, low building, with a slated roof, picturesque stacks of vine-draped chimneys, and latticed windows, completely vailed in clusters of blossoming roses. A low stone wall surrounded the space of cultivated ground which adjoined the dwelling; and, through yew trees and elms beyond, was just visible the spire of the pretty little church, an edifice of reddish stone, with projecting buttresses of some darker material.

Alice Percival was very weary; she had been traveling ever since early morning, and a part of the previous day, yet a feeling of pleasure thrilled her heart at the sight of this picturesque spot, which was probably to be her future residence.

"I know I shall like Tregarvan Rectory," she thought, as the car stopped in front of the rose covered porch, and a sweet, matronly looking woman, of about forty, came out to receive her. Alice could only see that her hair and eyes were of a bright brown, and her figure plump and comfortable to look upon, before she found herself warmly greeted and welcomed to Tregarvan.

"I am Mrs. Eskett," said the lady, her rosy face beaming with hospitable smiles, "and you are Miss Percival. I am very glad to see you, my dear. Come in and see my husband and your little pupils, who have been watching for their governess to come these two hours."

She led Alice into a low-ceiled room, lighted by oblong casements, filled with tiny diamond shaped panes of glass, and lined around with books, where, at a table literally groaning with volumes, papers, and pamphlets, sat a tall, bald-headed man, who wore green spectacles, and had a pen sticking in warlike fashion behind each ear. His coat, shiny at the seams, and belonging to some antedeluvian cut

and pattern, hung loosely on his shoulders, and his middle finger was steeped to the very bone in ink.

"Ralph," said Mrs. Eskett, "this is——"

"My dear," interrupted the rector, who looked as if he were entrenched behind a complete fortification of books, inkstands and sand-boxes. "I've told you, again and again, I would not see any of the old women before twelve o'clock. How do they suppose I'm to get my sermons written if——"

"But this isn't an old woman, my dear," laughingly interposed Mrs. Eskett.

"Is it a man," said the near-sighted rector, peering with wrinkled brows over the top of a huge dictionary. "Where are my glasses? I've got my sermon spectacles on," and he fumbled, helplessly around, sending a drift of sheets of paper flying on the floor, like a magnified snow-storm. "Tell him to go about his business, Theresa, why don't you? I can't be bothered in the morning. I have all my inspirations in the morning. How would they like it, if my sermons were as flat as stale beer? I tell you I won't stand it!"

He rumpled up the fringe of reddish gray hair that hung over his temples, as he spoke, with the look and manner of a baited lion! Mrs. Eskett, apparently quite accustomed to his eccentricities, paid no attention, whatever, to them, and walked straight up to him, leading Alice by the hand. Her first action, when she had fairly entered within the folio and quarto fortifications, was to take off her liege lord's spectacles.

"Eh!" cried the rector, staring at Miss Percival through his protuberated light blue eyes, as if the gift of sight had suddenly been bestowed upon him, "it's a young lady."

"Of course it is," said Mrs. Eskett. "It is Miss Percival, the governess, whom Miss Hartford was so good as to recommend to us."

"How do you do, Miss Percival?" said Mr. Eskett, rising, although in the action a leaning tower of books toppled over. "I'm glad to see you—pray don't mind my bearishness—nobody does. I hope we shall be able to make you happy here. The girls are very nice little girls, and I dare say they'll be obedient."

With these words Mr. Eskett sat down again, and began to re-collect the scattered sheets of manuscript, while his wife led Alice away to the room intended for her. It was a sweet little chamber, under the very eaves of the house,

smelling deliciously of sweet clover and dried rose leaves, with curtains and drapery of snow-white homespun linen.

"Do you think you shall like it?" said Mrs. Eskett, who had watched Alice's face, as she surveyed her new domain.

"Oh, so much!" the governess answered, and Mrs. Eskett put her arms round her neck and gave her a genial kiss.

"I am so glad you are pretty," said the rector's wife. "I like to look at pretty things."

"Am I pretty?" asked Alice, confused, yet smiling—and in the same instant the door opened. and a little head, thatched with hair the same reddish color as the fringe overhanging the rector's temples, peeped in.

"May me come in, mamma?" piped a small voice.

"Yes, come in, rebels," said Mrs. Eskett, and the owner of the head ran into Alice's arms.

"I'm Phebe," said she; "I'm ugly, but I can learn real quick. Emily is pretty, but she can't say her multiplication table. And Agnes is sullen, sometimes."

"Hush—h—h!" said Mrs. Eskett, holding up a warning finger. "Let Miss Percival discover the different characteristics of her pupils for herself."

And she introduced two girls of eight and nine, who proved to be the before-mentioned Emily and Agnes.

Phebe, the frank little sprite of six, had spoken the truth; she was "ugly," as far as personal appearance went, with light blue eyes, and hair by courtesy called auburn, the very feminine double of the rector of Tregarvan, while a tress of hair, called "cow lock," stood straight up above her forehead, utterly rebellious to hairbrush or pomatum pot, and her fair complexion was thickly sown with freckles. Emily, the next, was like her mother, regularly featured and comely, with hazel eyes and sunny brown hair, while Agnes, the eldest, was a shy child, shrinking behind Mrs. Eskett, and scarcely lifting her eyes high enough for Miss Percival to perceive that they were of a deep, liquid gray, while her hair was nearly black, and her complexion as fresh as a wild rose.

"Now, children," said Mrs. Eskett, when the ceremony of introduction had been duly performed, "run away and leave Miss Percival in peace for a few minutes to unpack her things and get ready for dinner. We are old-fashioned people, Miss Percival," she added, with a pleasant smile,

"and dine at one o'clock, so you see you have not much time to spare."

And she withdrew with the three little girls in her train, while in the hall Alice could hear Phebe's bird-voice chirping:

"Oh, mamma, I love her so much," and Mrs. Eskett's low tone replying:

"See that you show it then by being very attentive to your lessons and obedient."

This was an auspicious beginning for Alice in her new position, and at the close of the dinner she felt that Phebe's favorable impression concerning her was shared by the rector and his wife. So courteous, so amiable were they in their intercourse with the little governess that ere she had passed twenty-four hours in the rectory of Tregarvan, her admiration for its inmates found expression in a letter which she indited to her sister Rena. This letter she gave to the rector, asking him if he would not oblige her by sending it to the post-office.

The rector glanced at the superscription, written in Alice's delicate, legible running hand: "Miss Rena Percival, Glenhampton Castle, Glenhampton, Kent," and he started as if the visage of some old familiar friend had stared him suddenly in the face.

"Glenhampton Castle! Glenhampton!" he repeated. "Is your sister there, Miss Percival? Upon my word this is a very singular coincidence—very! Glenhampton Castle, my dear Theresa—you remember!"

"I remember that you did curate's duty there one year, when you were first engaged to me," said his wife, good humoredly; "and that I thought his lordship ought to have bestowed the St. Hilda's living upon you when the fat old incumbent died, seeing that he always professed to be such a friend of yours."

"Gently, Theresa, gently," said Mr. Eskett. "Remember that it is not always the richest living in which one can do the most good. I have never seen any real reason to regret that I came to Tregarvan, instead of settling down at St. Hilda's. And are you acquainted with these Glenhamptons, my dear?" he asked, turning to Alice.

"I know Lady Blanche Arden, the Earl of Glenhampton's daughter," Alice answered; "she was at school with

us at Hartford Lodge, and it is she that my sister is at present visiting."

"Strange," muttered Mr. Eskett, the eyelids drooping over his near-sighted orbs, "strange. And I had supposed that that leaf of my life's book was closed forever. We never know how strangely the threads of existence are interwoven—we call the great loom chance—yet every Christian knows that there is no such thing as chance. Yes, it is passing strange."

"If you are acquainted with Lady Blanche Arden, of course you know the story of the death of the little twin babies—the tragedy that filled Glenhampton with gloom for so many years," said Mrs. Eskett.

And as she spoke the same vision rose up before Alice Percival's memory that had flashed across the mind's eye of her sister as the Glenhampton barouche had rolled past the gray portals of St. Hilda's Church.

"To the memory of Allegra and Katherine, twin daughters of Adelbert, Earl of Glenhampton," with the words that followed, clear to tell who have loved and lost babe-angels: "Suffer little children to come unto me, and forbid them not, for of such is the Kingdom of Heaven."

"I never heard the story," she said, turning to Mrs. Eskett. "Tell me of it, please. Is it a secret?'

"Ralph must tell you," said the rector's wife, turning to her husband. "It all happened while he was a curate at St. Hilda's doing the duty of an absentee rector, who drew the income and nursed himself and his gout at Hyeres. Don't shake your dear old head, Ralph—you know it is all true, every word of it."

"Would you like to hear the history of a romance in real life, Miss Percival?" asked Mr. Eskett, mildly. "There will be plenty of time to tell it before Thomas comes in to get your letter, and as your sister is now sojourning at Glenhampton Castle, it may be interesting to you."

"I should like it very much," Alice answered; and then while Mrs. Eskett took the little girls upstairs to impress practically upon their minds the first section of the proverb: "Early to bed and early to rise" the rector moved his chair where the light from the shaded lamp should not fall upon his weakening eyes, and, with Alice sitting in the low window seat, opposite, began his story.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE RECTOR'S STORY.

"Let me see!" began the Rector of Tregarvan, after a moment of silence; "it must be sixteen or seventeen years now since I went to Glenhampton, to assume the temporary charge of St. Hilda's Church, situated in its near neighborhood, at the request of Lord Glenhampton, who was one of my school friends in our earlier days, and my college chum afterward. Have you ever seen Lord Glenhampton, my dear?"

"No, sir," answered Alice.

"Well, it doesn't matter much, only you could better have appreciated the contrast if you knew what a morbid, gloomy person he is now. As a young man he was one of the gayest, lightest-hearted fellows I ever knew, with a face like sunshine, and frank, free manners, that drew friends around him as if by instinct. He married very young—this, you must understand, was before I came to Glenhampton—a daughter of Lord Morville, who had died in Canada several years previously. She was a beautiful girl, and as good as she was beautiful, I am told; but she died in giving birth to twin daughters. And this was the beginning of the trouble that has ever since hung over the house of Glenhampton.

"They were pretty, healthy little babes, and the earl had them christened Allegra and Katherine, his dead wife's two names. The old servants have told me that it was a piteous sight to see the young earl hanging over these two motherless creatures, who were all that was left to him of the wife whose life seemed to have been nothing but a brief, bright vision. He had them with him night and day; he barely trusted them out of his sight for their daily walks in the arms of their attendants. He spent his whole time in studying vague resemblances in their baby features and innocent eyes to the mother who had never held them in her arms.

"Well, they grew and throve, when fate chanced to throw Lord Glenhampton into the companionship of a handsome young widow—a Mrs. Evelyn, the relict of an East Indian officer. I don't think he would have noticed her for herself, for his whole heart seemed buried in Allegra Morville's

grave; but she was a skillful maneuverer, and she won first his attention, then his admiration, by the extravagant attachment she professed for the twin girls. Perhaps I judge the present Lady Glenhampton too severely. I never saw her but once, and then I took an instinctive dislike to her. But, at all events, she took the earl by storm. He thought she would prove a good mother to his little ones, and he married her, scarcely more than a year after his wife's death.

"I don't know what the modern idea of it may be," said the rector, thoughtfully, putting the tips of his fingers together, "but I call it a sort of legal bigamy when a man, still loving a dead wife, marries another woman from any motive of interest or expediency. I told Glenhampton so, plainly, when he consulted me about this second marriage; but what man ever takes advice when his mind is once made up? Circumstances have proved that I was not altogether wrong, for—but I am anticipating my story," added the good man, catching at the broken threads of his narrative, as he might grasp at one of the falling books from his study table. "He married her, and the first change in his plans that she effected after she was Countess of Glenhampton was to persuade him that his health required a brief sojourn among the islands of the Mediterranean. He was ill, but his malady was not one which a southern climate, or the winds which blow over the orange groves of Sicily could exterminate. It was a broken heart, not tubercled lungs, which made his cheek pale and drew the dark hollows round his eyes. But a persistent woman can accomplish wonders, and to the Mediterranean they went. At the eleventh hour my lady discerned that the voyage would be too difficult and wearisome to the little ones, so they were left at home, in charge of trusted servants. Hartfield, the butler,—poor fellow, he is dead and gone these ten years—has told me, many a time, with the tears in his honest eyes, of the parting between Lord Glenhampton and the little creatures, whom he dreamed so little that he was never to see again. My lady's own child, by her first husband, was also left behind—a bright little boy of two or three years old—and it was just after the departure of the earl and the countess that I came to St. Hilda and assumed the temporary charge of the parish. I have somewhere among my old papers the letter Glenhampton wrote to me the night before he left England, commending, in terms of affecting entreaties, the

poor babies to my care and oversight. Well, well, Heaven knows I did my duty; although no one could have foreseen —but I am getting in advance of my story again!

"The head nurse left in charge of the three children was an elderly Welsh woman, Elison Polwheal by name—one of those quiet, softly moving persons who say but very little, yet always contrive to impress you with an idea of their strong, peculiar character. She had been Mrs. Evelyn's —I beg her ladyship's pardon, the Countess of Glenhampton's—nurse, in years before, as I have heard, and was trusted almost boundlessly. I myself thought that Elison was the best person who could be left in charge of the three children; but it only shows how liable we all are to be mistaken in our estimates of each other. No sooner was the earl and countess safely in Sicily than what does Elison Polwheal do but go and fall in love with a stupid old gardener or bailiff, attached to the place, although she was a good ten years older than he, and from that time her duties seemed only to claim a secondary part of her attention. I don't think that at first she actually neglected the children, but they no longer received her undivided care. I was just about making up my mind to write to Lord Glenhampton, advising him to empower me to find some other less preoccupied guardian for the little things, when one night in the twilight Elison Polwheal rushed into my presence like a mad creature, tearing her hair, groveling on the ground, and uttering sentences so incoherent that I could comprehend nothing whatever of her meaning, except that some great calamity had occurred.

"All too soon I learned what she meant. She had left the children playing in the meadows, while she had just been across the field to intercept this swain of hers on his homeward way. She had staid longer than she meant. The little creatures had somehow strayed through a hole in the fence of whose existence she was unaware, and found their way down to the river side, and she was only in time to see them perish before her eyes."

"Oh, how horrible!" murmured Alice, involuntarily drawing a long breath.

"It *was* horrible!" said Mr. Eskett, slowly. "I shall never forget Elison Polwheal's horror and dismay. I hardly knew what I said or did at first, but I summoned help as soon as possible, and we had the river dragged as far as practicable

—it was an outlet of the Medway, not very wide, but one of those stealthy, sluggish streams where there are deep, treacherous pools that the country-side people assert to be bottomless, and our dread was that the bodies should have been caught and drawn down by the whirling current into some of those hidden and unfathomable caverns. All our endeavors were in vain—and it was not until a fortnight afterward that the poor little corpses, so altered by the action of the water and the effects of time as to be recognizable only by their garments and the gold necklaces they had always worn since their birth, were recovered some miles down, where they had probably been drifted in the disturbance of the current subsequently to an unusually severe storm of wind and rain, so that before the Earl of Glenhampton—detained by the sudden illness of his wife, who gave birth to a daughter on the very day that the awful tidings of their bereavement reached Palermo, where they were staying—could arrive, his little twin girls were sleeping among the century dead ancestors in the family mausoleum. I could not tell you the story of Lord Glenhampton's frantic, unreasonable grief, even were I to attempt it. For a season it reduced him to the level of the maniacs whom we confine in solitary dungeons. Suffice it to say that he has never since held up his head."

"And the child born at Palermo?"

"Was Lady Blanche Arden—a child whose grace, beauty, and affectionate disposition have failed to win for her in her father's heart the place her little twin sisters held. He is a kind father, but the holiest and sweetest affection of his nature lie sepulchred forever, and only the hand of the Angel of Death can roll the stone away."

"And what became of Elison Polwheal? Did they discharge her?"

"She did not wait to be discharged; she returned to her native Welsh hills, declaring frantically that she never dared to look upon her mistress' face again. Nor did she, to my knowledge. She is living near Tregarvan now, in the house where she was born, a woman over eighty years of age, bedridden and helpless, and daily longing for death to come and set her free. I visit her sometimes and read to her, but I confess to an uncomfortable feeling of aversion toward her; and I sometimes think she mistrusts it. My wife can sometimes make her talk, but with me she takes refuge in

curt monosyllables, as if the common people around her hold her in fear and dislike as a witch, for we are superstitious folks here in Wales. She is weary of her life, but Death does not always come when he is most longed for, and I do not see but that she is likely to live to be a hundred, for the Polwheals were always a long-lived race."

"But how does she live? Who provides for her?" asked Miss Percival.

"I believe Lady Glenhampton makes her a yearly allowance in consideration of her faithful services before the last terrible catastrophe. It shows that the countess must have a kind heart."

"Then she did not marry this farm-servant after all?"

"Oh, no; he went off to the Continent, and married some one else, I suppose; it is the general ending of all such ill-assorted love affairs."

"I should like to see her," said Alice, musingly.

"So you shall some time when Theresa goes up there on one of her errands of long-suffering kindness. She is a ghastly sight. If you are at all imaginative, she will remind you of some one whom death has somehow forgotten—a corpse marvelously endowed with galvanic life. But she is rather interesting, too, as a relic of the past. Now, tell me, honestly," said the rector, rousing Alice from a reverie into which she was unconsciously allowing herself to drift, "are you tired of my long story?"

"Tired? Oh, no; I have been more interested than I can tell you. I wonder," she added, "if Rena knows of it?"

"Most probably she does, if she is, as you say, the bosom friend of Lady Blanche."

"It is not a family secret?"

"Oh, no—not at all; why should it be? Only, of course, it is not a favorite topic of conversation with the family, for, as I have told you, Lord Glenhampton has never recovered from the loss, and it is his wife's constant endeavor to cheer him, and induce him, as far as possible, to forget the melancholy past."

Mrs. Eskett came down at this moment, and the conversation took another turn.

But after Alice had gone to her little room that night, she wrote another long epistle to Rena, in which she de-

tailed, circumstantially, the story she had that evening listened to.

"I thought it would interest you, dear Rena," she added, "for all such family histories have an interest of their own. And I distinctly remember—do not you?—the inscription in the beautiful old church by the wayside where we stopped with poor grandpapa, the night he died, when we read the names of 'Allegra and Katherine, twin daughters of Lord Glenhampton,' and marveled, in our childish fashion, over the beauty of the sculptured marble angels. We did not dream then how curiously we should be brought into association with those names again, I through the memory of very kind friends here, and you through the presence of the very scenes where poor little Allegra and Katherine were born and died.

"Dear Rena, tell me truly whether you are happy there, among the grandeurs of Glenhampton Castle? Sometimes I think you would have been better off to have taken the situation of governess somewhere, and never come in contact with people and things that cannot always be within your reach; but you were ever more ambitious than poor little I, and I must not venture to judge for you. Only I wish I could tell you how very, very happy I am, and how kind they all are to me.

ALLIE."

CHAPTER XVII.

MISS PERCIVAL GOES TO LONDON.

Alice Percival would indeed have sufficiently comprehended the wide contrast between her sister's life and her own, could she have seen Rena on this lovely September afternoon, sitting on one of the carved rustic chairs under the spreading boughs of an ancient beech tree, whose umbrageous foliage formed a complete canopy overhead, with Lord Vere Temple lying on the grass at her feet, Captain Evelyn leaning against the trunk of the tree, and Mr. Poynings close by.

Lady Blanche Arden sat at no great distance, with Mr. Alkenard sketching the opposite scene for her benefit; but Lady Blanche was evidently quite a secondary personage in the animated little drama of real life now being enacted at Glenhampton.

From the windows of her own boudoir, Lady Glenhampton watched the scene with a sensation of angry uneasiness at her heart.

"Blanche," she had said that morning to her daughter, "is not your friend, Miss Percival, a good deal of a flirt?"

Blanche opened wide her innocent dark eyes.

"Oh, no, mamma. What can make you think so?"

"Her own conduct, my dear. Don't you see how she attracts our gentleman visitors?"

"But, mamma, it is because she cannot help it. It is not her fault that she is beautiful and fascinating. I am sure Vere and Ernest cannot admire her any more than I do. Rena always attracted people around her, as if she had been an enchantress."

Lady Glenhampton shook her head, unconvinced.

"I don't like having these enchantresses in my house, Blanche. I am almost sorry you invited her here."

"Mamma!"

"And I sincerely hope," went on Lady Glenhampton, "that she will have the good sense not to prolong her stay much further than its appointed time."

"Mamma, you are ungenerous now," pleaded Blanche, every impulse of her noble nature roused in behalf of her

friend. "Rena has no home to go to—no connections to receive her."

"Is that any reason that she should make a home of Glenhampton Castle?" asked the countess, coldly.

"But, mamma, what has Rena done?"

"It is not what she has done, my daughter, so much as what she may do in the future."

"I don't understand you," said innocent Blanche.

Lady Glenhampton looked at the young, puzzled face almost pityingly. It seemed incredible that her daughter should be so ignorant of the ways of the world.

"Blanche," she said, "you don't consider Ernest is beginning to admire Miss Percival very much, and——"

"Oh, mamma!" breathlessly interrupted Blanche, "do you really think so? Then it was not all my own imagination, as I feared. Would not it be nice to have Rena here always?"

"Blanche! Blanche!" ejaculated the countess, more sharply than she had ever before spoken to her petted child, "if you would stop to reflect for one instant, you would know how vitally necessary it is for your brother Ernest to marry a wife whose wealth and family will add new dignity to the honorable old name of Evelyn."

"But we are rich, mamma."

"Yes, we are rich, but I know too well, from what your father has, at different times, let fall, that Ernest Evelyn will never reap any advantage from the golden possessions of the Glenhamptons."

"Mamma, surely that would be unjust."

"Not as the world judges such things, my child. Ernest Evelyn is not Lord Glenhampton's child, and your father has already been most generous toward him. You are the heiress of Glenhampton, my Blanche, and you only."

"Then I will divide it with him," cried the young girl, passionately.

"My darling, that would not be right, neither would the law allow any such undue generosity on your part. Ernest has his own future to carve out, and he can best accomplish it by a successful matrimonial alliance. Hush! there is Lord Vere calling to know if you are ready for your ride! Don't keep him waiting; the horses are at the door."

And Blanche, who had been standing in her riding-habit

of dark green velvet, tripped away, her soft eyes sparkling beneath the shadow of the long black plume of her hat.

But Lady Glenhampton had not judged it best to divulge to her daughter the secret anxiety which was corroding her heart, the fear lest Rena Percival's brilliant beauty and marvelous grace should wile away from unsuspecting Blanche the dearest treasure of her girl-heart, Lord Vere Temple's allegiance.

"For, after all," thought the countess, restlessly biting her under lip, "there is no regular engagement between them as yet, and the truest heart that ever beat would be inveigled by the witching ways of yonder little siren. It is an infatuation, and nothing more, but it may embitter Blanche's whole life, nevertheless. Oh, why—why will not fate let me be happy for a brief while, after all that I have endured."

Her head dropped on her hands, the lids fell heavily over her eyes, and something like a groan broke from her lips.

It was but too evident that the majestic Countess of Glenhampton, surrounded as she was by wealth, luxury, and splendor, was not happy.

But there was one consolation left to her. Ernest must join his regiment in October to proceed to town, and one, at least, of the two impending dangers would be averted. Lady Glenhampton resolved to endure the inevitable as patiently as possible, in view of its brief continuance. What, therefore, was her vexation and inward consternation when Ernest came gayly into the breakfast-room one morniug with an open letter in his hand.

"Congratulate me, mamma," he said, with the unconcealed glee of a schoolboy. "I've got another month's leave of absence."

"Upon my word that's jolly!" cried Lord Vere. "You know I was saying only the other day that our little circle here was too pleasant to lose even one element."

Lady Glenhampton smiled and tried to say something pleasant and congratulatory, but the words died away on her lips, and Ernest read in the one single glance from Rena's momentarily uplifted eyes that she was not indifferent to his tidings.

"Fate is pitted against me," thought the countess, while Miss Clive, sitting motionless in her accustomed place, silently watched the tides of youth and hope, love and ex-

pectation eddying around her, herself lifted as far out of its atmosphere as if she were lying under the shadow of a coffin-lid.

But all things must come to an end, and so, in its appointed time, did Captain Evelyn's month of absence—the thirty longest days his lady mother had ever known, as it seemed to her. Mr. Alkenard had long returned to his chambers at the Temple; Lord Vere came and went, and still Rena Percival staid on at Glenhampton Castle.

"I can't spare you yet, dearest," was Lady Blanche's coaxing plea whenever she made some faint allusion to taking her departure. "I should be so lonely without you."

And the red and brown leaves rustled down from walnut, beech, and elm, and the snow-wreaths of early winter came, and the Christmas festivities filled the Castle with gayety, to which the only drawback was the earl's still protracted absence on the Continent—and Easter followed.

The Countess of Glenhampton began to feel as if Rena's intimacy with her daughter must be broken up at all hazards. It had been dangerous at first, before she was admitted to the privileges of an almost acknowledged member of the household—it was trebly perilous now.

"Blanche," said the countess, at the luncheon table, one glorious March day, as her daughter entered the room a little pale and wearied from a long ramble in the leafless woods with her friend Rena and Lord Vere Temple, "I have received a letter to-day from my old friend, the Duchess of St. Burgoyne—a letter that interests you somewhat!"

"I don't know how it possibly can, mamma," said Blanche, laughing, "as I don't think I ever saw her grace."

"She has always promised herself the pleasure of presenting my daughter at court, Blanche, when you were old enough to claim the distinction, and she writes me that there is to be a drawing-room the last of this month."

"Does that mean that we are to go up to town, mamma?"

"Would you not like it, my love?"

"Very much, mamma, if Rena will go too."

"I shall be very happy if Miss Percival will consent to accompany us to London," observed Lady Glenhampton, rather icily than otherwise, and Rena, in a few gracefully uttered words, expressed her thanks for the invitation so grudgingly seconded.

"I see how it is," she thought, smiling at her own reflec-

tion in the opposite mirror. "Her ladyship wants to interrupt the serene current of Captain Ernest's captivation, to say nothing of any interest Lord Vere may be beginning to feel in poor little me! Does she imagine I do not see through her? Well, London is quite as good a field for my campaign as Glenhampton Castle. I've had a delightful winter here, and now I mean to have an equally charming spring in London. By the time that is over I shall probably have some definite plans of my own, which will relieve my lady countess of my unwelcome presence."

These fancies passed rapidly through her mind as she sat toying with her wine-glass, while the others were gayly discussing the probabilities of a brilliant season during the approaching spring. Blanche alone was silent, she had drooped a little during the last few weeks, and Lady Glenhampton's vigilant eye was quick to detect the change.

"She is not well," she thought. "Can it be possible that she sees how surely Vere Temple's fickle heart is drifting away from her? She must have change, at all events, and this London plan will make a most opportune diversion in her favor."

"I've a great mind to go up to London with you," said Lord Vere. "If you will allow me to become your escort, Lady Glenhampton, I can easily write to my friends in Nottinghamshire, and put off my promised visit there for a few days."

"By no means," said Lady Glenhampton, with an earnestness that was quite genuine; "I can allow no engagements to be broken on my account. Dufour is all the escort we need, and the house in Grosvenor square is all ready to receive us at any moment. Perhaps, later in the season, you may join us in London. By which time," Lady Glenhampton added, to herself, "I shall have taken specially good care to get rid of this aggravating little siren, Miss Percival."

What a blessed thing it is that our thoughts are invisible to those who listen to our honeyed words.

Rena's next letter written to her sister Alice contained an enthusiastic description of the palatial residence in Grosvenor square, whose splendors rivaled those of the old castle in Kent.

The inspiring air of London, with the additional stimulant of a prospective presentation at the Court of St. James,

failed to produce the desired effect upon the health of Lady Blanche Arden.

She grew daily paler and thinner; her strength, never very Herculean, waxed daily less and less, until Lady Glenhampton grew alarmed, and sent for Sir Morford Delville, the Esculapius of all the most aristocratic circles.

Sir Morford, a tall, handsome gentleman, with Roman features, a voice like a brooding dove, and a manner of extreme interest, came accordingly, felt Lady Blanche's pulse with a finger as light as a thistle-down, asked her one or two insinuatingly spoken questions, and "hoped that this was nothing more than a trifling indisposition."

"There, mamma," said Lady Blanche, "I told you so."

But when the fashionable physician saw the countess separately, he assumed quite a different tone.

"I don't wish to alarm you, Lady Glenhampton," he said, courteously; "but Lady Blanche must leave London directly for the sea air."

"But she is to be presented at court on Tuesday," cried Lady Glenhampton, aghast.

Sir Morford shook his head positively.

"Impossible!" he said. "She must be removed from this foggy atmosphere at once. I can't call it any special disease. It is rather a general failing and giving way of all the springs of life. Take her to the sea-side at once—Brighton—Gravesend—I don't care where—and if a few days there do not build her up in some degree she must go abroad."

And Sir Morford penciled a prescription on one of the perfumed leaves of his memorandum-book, and departed to the next aristocratic threshold which the vulgar presence of sickness had presumed to invade, leaving Lady Glenhampton sorely bewildered.

Of one thing she was quite certain—the drawing-room must be postponed indefinitely—and, in order that no time might be lost, she sat down at once and wrote a telegram to Captain Evelyn, requesting him to meet her at Brighton.

"I will have it as near like home as possible for my poor child," she said within herself, "and I will *not* have this Miss Percival in our train. I can easily invent some excuse for leaving her here, and the spell her presence seems to exert over Blanche once broken, it will not be difficult to get

rid of her effectually. Lady Carrisley wrote something to me about wanting a governess to take to Paris with her, and Julia Fenwick is always quarreling with her governesses. I can find her a situation she will scarcely have the face to refuse."

And so, having safely dispatched her telegraphic missive by the hand of a trusty servant, the countess joined her daughter and Miss Percival in the former's sitting-room.

"Well, my love," she said, turning to Blanche, "Sir Morford's visit will have the effect of altering our plans very materially. We must go down to Brighton in to-morrow morning's earliest train—he thinks you need sea air."

"But, mamma, the drawing-room!" cried Blanche, with a face of surprise.

"I know it, but there will be other drawing-rooms later in the season. You don't mind being disappointed for once?"

"No, mamma, but—Lady St. Burgoyne, who is coming up from Balfour Castle on purpose to present me."

"I can write her an explanatory letter."

"But I am not so sick as to necessitate so much haste as this, mamma," cried Blanche, with a puzzled face.

"No, darling, but you know Sir Morford's apt to be rather autocratic, and having once placed you under his care, it will be necessary that you obey his directions with circumstantial exactness."

"Well, mamma, I will do just as you wish," meekly assented Lady Blanche, whose docility and sweetness of temper were rather a contrast to her mother's somewhat despotic temperament. "But how can Rena go? Her dress is at the *modiste's* yet."

Lady Glenhampton lifted her large black eyes, and fixed them full upon the face of Rena, who glanced at her in the same moment.

"I am sorry," she said; "but it would be a great accommodation to me if Miss Percival would remain in Grosvenor square to take charge of things a little for the present."

"Mamma," interposed Blanche, "surely the housekeeper——"

"Blanche," said Rena, with the crimson glow rising to her cheeks, "pray do not deprive me of the pleasure of becom-

ing a convenience to your mother. Lady Glenhampton, I shall be delighted to be of any service."

"You are very kind," said the countess, in the same artificial tone. "If you will be so kind as to ring for Lady Blanche's maid we can give all the necessary directions at once."

Rena obeyed, moving with the slow haughtiness of a princess. If she could at that moment have obeyed the tumultuous dictates of her own heart she would have struck the smiling, insolent countess to the ground.

"She is making an upper-servant of me," she thought, biting her lip until the blood started, "and Blanche, in her unconsciousness, never suspects it. You are deepening my indebtedness to you with every hour, Countess of Glenhampton, but the day of reckoning will surely come!"

And she resolutely put aside her own resentment while she assisted Blanche with the numerous and hurried preparations that were incident to her unexpected journey.

"Dear Rena," said the young girl, with her arms round her friend's neck, "you will come to us at Brighton if I do not soon return?"

"How can I tell, Blanche?" asked Rena, evasively. "My future is not in my own hands. But one thing I won't forget—my promise one day to be your bridesmaid."

The paleness crept over Blanche's cheek, and her arms dropped languidly at her side.

"I see now how foolish they were, our school-day vows and promises," she said, in a low tone. "I do not think, now, that I shall ever need a bridesmaid, Rena."

"Blanche, you are not so ill as that!"

"No, it isn't that, Rena—but, somehow, I don't think Vere cares for me as he used to do, and——"

Her head drooped on her friend's shoulder, and she burst into a passionate fit of tears. At the same instant the door opened and Lady Glenhampton entered with a sealed letter in her hand.

"Miss Percival," she said, severely, "it is very wrong of you to agitate Lady Blanche Arden in this manner. These tragic scenes may be very romantic, but they are quite inappropriate to an occasion like this."

Rena sat pale and silent, saying not a word in her own defense, while Lady Blanche, dashing the newly shed tears from her eyes, broke out into a vindication of her friend.

"Never mind how it happened, now, darling," said Lady Glenhampton, only partially modified. "I don't like to see you wearing yourself out with idle emotions—that is all. Miss Percival," turning to the elder girl, "I beg you will be so kind as to give this note to the Duchess of St. Burgoyne when she calls here, as she will probably do to-morrow some time. I would send it by a servant, did I know when she intends to be in town. As it is, I am compelled to trouble you."

"It will be no trouble at all," said Rena, as stiffly as her ladyship, while at the same time she could not help observing that Lady Glenhampton spoke to her precisely as she did to Mrs. Carter, the Grosvenor square housekeeper.

"Another little item to be remembered in my Lady Glenhampton's favor when we have our final settlement," she thought, calmly.

CHAPTER XVIII.

RENÁ EN MASQUERADE.

Lady Blanche Arden parted from Miss Percival with many tears and affectionate protestations, although she was firmly convinced that their separation would be but for a few days; Lady Glenhampton, with a cold touch of the gloved hand, and a chilling inclination of the head, and Rena found herself alone, except for the corps of servants always left in charge of the superb mansion in Grosvenor square.

She walked through the echoing rooms, and, as she paused in front of Lady Blanche's door, one of the servants came up.

"I was looking for you, Miss Percival," she said. "My Lady Blanche's court-dress have just arriv', and my lady's maid ain't here, and——"

"And so you thought I would do just as well, Dorcas," said Miss Percival, with a slight shrug of her shoulders, "Very well, bring it into the dressing-room."

Not until the servants had uttered their exclamations of admiration at the beauty of the dress, and regrets that their young mistress could not be there to wear it into the presence of her gracious sovereign, did Rena venture to lock the door, and herself contemplate the splendors of the "court-dress."

It was of rich, heavy silk, of the color which exactly simulates the tender hues of a tranquil sea beneath the light of a June moon, the seams covered with seed pearls, and every available place trimmed with a glimmering fringe of pearl, while the train of superb emerald velvet, exactly matched it in color, and a vail of white tulle, sprinkled over with pearls, lay in its adjoining box, fastened to a wreath of white syringa buds mingled with green leaves.

"It is a dress fit for a queen!" said Rena, half-aloud. "I wonder how it would become me!"

The thought scarcely entered Miss Percival's somewhat capricious little head, before it was put into execution, and five minutes afterward, Rena stood before the long glass, in the glistening lights and shadows of the court-dress, the

pearl-dotted vail looped fantastically away from her dark ringlets, over which the syringa buds drooped as if they loved to caress the glossy spirals, and the magnificent sweep of emerald velvet trailing far behind her over the carpet.

She looked at herself with a half-conscious thrill of pride in the contemplation of her own radiant young beauty. Yes, she became it passing well, she thought, as she noted the sparkle in her deep hazel eyes, the roses on her satin-smooth cheeks. Oh! why—why, was she not born to such imperial decorations as these? Why should she never taste the rarified air of courts—she, whose nature craved it so passionately?

Suddenly a curious whim, or rather caprice, darted into her restless brain.

"I will!" she exclaimed aloud, throwing back the pearl vail that drooped so low over her fair forehead. "I will, just for once! Nobody can prevent me! Lady Blanche would not care. She would ouly laugh and call it an excellent joke. And, as for my lady, the countess, I should rather enjoy her wrath and indignation at what she will be sure to phrase my unwarrantable presumption. I think I hear her mouthing out the words now. At all events, the plan is worth trying, just for the sake of aggravating my lady. She has shown the flag of defiance plainly enough. I know of no good reason why I should hesitate to retaliate."

There was a fevered red in her cheeks, a new light burning in her eyes, as she carefully removed the gorgeous dress, article by article, marveling the while to observe how perfectly its component parts fitted her own slender young figure, and then laid it carefully away in its boxes, in Blanche's inner dressing-room.

"Shall I put it away, Miss Percival?" asked the upper housemaid, who was in the hall without, when Rena emerged from her temporary masquerade.

"Leave it just where it is," said Rena, quietly, and passed on to her own room.

Her first action on entering there, was to go to her little rosewood writing-desk, a present from Lady Blanche, only the week before, unlock it, and take thence the letter the countess had written to the Duchess of St. Burgoyne. She lighted one of the wax tapers, in the little ivory taper-stand on the dressing-table, and held the missive in the clear, white flame, watching it burn until the ends of her own

pretty fingers were scorched, and she was forced to throw the three-cornered bit of charred paper, which was all that remained of the epistle, into the fender.

"So much for that!" said Rena, her eyes sparkling like those of a mischievous child. "Her ladyship will probably learn not to make a servant of me again. Now let us wait and see how events develop themselves. What a very lucky thing it is for the success of my plot that old Lady St. Burgoyne hasn't seen Lady Blanche Arden since she was ten years old. We do look alike, people say—and now I must try my skill as an amateur actress."

The Duchess of St. Burgoyne was one of those ladies who are chronically, habitually, and incorrigibly behind time. She never reached a steamboat landing or a railway station in season. She looked upon time as a runaway, whom it was hopeless to try to overtake. She had not reached St. George's chapel at the celebration of her own wedding until half the guests had gone away in despair—she was so behind time at her son's christening that the bishop lost all patience, and she reached Paris just too late to attend her own father's funeral, just twenty years ago. Consequently the Duchess of St. Burgoyne, who had fully intended to be in London on Monday afternoon did not arrive there until Tuesday morning.

"People didn't use to be in such a hurry when I was a girl!" said she. "However, I'm very glad I am here. I wouldn't have missed presenting Edith Glenhampton's girl for anything. Do you think I ought to call there first, Balfour? or do you suppose she'll be all ready?"

The Marquis of Balfour, her grace's eldest son, dubiously submitted that there would not be time.

"Oh, there's plenty of time," said the Duchess of St. Burgoyne. There always was time, according to her grace's theory and never in her practice. "However, I don't know that it's necessary, and one does feel tired after that racketing railway journey up. So Danesberry shall bring me tea, and I'll have a nap before I begin to dress."

The Duchess of St. Burgoyne in her brown traveling dress looked as unlike the preconceived idea people generally have of a duchess as the actors in real life are dissimilar to the knights and ladies of a three-volume novel. She was a tall, thin old lady, with gray hair, a hooked nose, and an eye blue and keen as a falcon's; and her garb, as she sat there

sipping her cup of strong green tea, was as sober-looking as if she had been a milliner, instead of a duchess.

Lord Balfour sat opposite, reading a newspaper. He was a tall and handsome man of two or three-and-thirty, like, and yet unlike, his mother, whom he loved tenderly, in spite of her many whimsical peculiarities of character.

"Come, mamma," he said, after the duchess had skimmed through half a dozen morning papers, "you'll not have time for a full-dress toilet if you don't ring for Nancy and begin!"

"There is plenty of time," said the duchess, absently.

But Lord Balfour took the paper from her with gentle violence, and escorted her to the door, where Nancy, her trusty tirewoman, met her. Between the Marquis of Balfour and Nancy Briggs, the poor duchess declared she was always being "hurried out of her senses."

Lady St. Burgoyne, as she stood in the superb entrance hall of Burgoyne House, waiting for the carriage to be announced, was like a duchess, in good truth, at last. Her dress of black velvet, with its sweeping train; her white vail of heavy wrought point d'Alencon, the coronet and stomacher of magnificent diamonds that she wore, made her look like the nobly born lady that she was. Lord Balfour looked admiringly at her.

"If you weren't a married woman, mamma, I should certainly fall in love with you," said he, sportively. "You look so nice!"

"Hold your tongue," said Lady St. Burgoyne, briskly, "and keep your compliments for Edith Glenhampton's girl!"

And she gave him an energetic little tap with her jeweled fan for presuming to kiss her hand as he helped her into the carriage.

Owing to the united efforts of Nancy and Lord Balfour, the Duchess of St. Burgoyne was not more than fifteen minutes behind hand, when the carriage—a wide, old-fashioned vehicle, in which the duchess had made her wedding calls nearly half a century ago, stopped in front of the mansion in Grosvenor square.

Parkinson, the porter, who had received his orders from Miss Percival to admit all visitors at once to her presence, threw open the door and the tall duchess sailed into the drawing-room.

"It's troublesome to get out," she said, "in one's train and all; but as I haven't called, it mightn't seem sufficiently cordial to sit still in the carriage and send for her. If you'll just hold my train, Balfour, it won't be a *great* deal of trouble!"

Rena Percival stood in the center of the large apartment, a beautiful vision of youth and loveliness and maiden bloom, the vail floating like a pearl-gemmed cloud over her shoulders, the emerald lights of her dress shining as it lay in rippled undulations along the floor, and her beautiful arms, neck, and shoulders, unadorned by a single jewel (ah, if Lady Blanche Arden had only had the foresight to leave her jewel-case behind) looking as if they were molded in alabaster. As she advanced with a smile to great them, Lady St. Burgoyne stopped short, as surprised and delighted as if she had met a lovely white angel, and Lord Balfour, albeit he had seen many fair women in his day, felt a thrill of admiration quiver through his whole frame.

Lady St. Burgoyne put up her eye-glass, and took a good look at the pretty apparition!

"My dear," said she, drawing Rena to her, and kissing her, "how lovely you are—and how like your poor, dear father! But where is Edith? I mean your mamma—she always will be Edith to me, if she had twenty daughters as tall as you are!"

"The Countess of Glenhampton was called suddenly away to Brighton, before she had time to notify you," answered Rena. coloring as she spoke the words of unmistakable equivocation; "and——"

"Oh, yes, it's all right," said Lady St. Burgoyne. "She knew you wouldn't want to miss the drawing-room, and that I would take good care of you, my dear. This is my son, Lord Balfour, Edith—is it Edith?" she added, as Lord Balfour bowed before the radiant young creature.

"No," Rena answered again, feeling the crimson burn in her cheeks, "it is Blanche."

"And a very pretty name it is, too," said Lady St. Burgoyne; "but I believe we have no time to lose—at least Balfour says so, although Balfour is always hurrying me. Our carriage is wide, and I think there'll be plenty of room in it, as Edith is not here to go, and it will be more social to be all together!"

For which suggestion Rena Percival thanked the kindly

duchess in her heart, for she had not ventured to ask the surly coachman for the carriage, trusting to that luck which, as it seemed, stanchly befriended her.

"Don't you think she's very like her father, Balfour?" asked the duchess when they were snugly ensconced in the roomy old family coach. "But I forgot—you never saw Adelbert Arden as he used to be before he married Edith! Of course you know all about your father's first marriage, my dear? It was a sad affair, and your father never has seemed quite the same man since. Perhaps you don't like to talk about it—well, well, I can't blame you—these family tragedies are not always pleasant topics of conversation?"

And lady St. Burgoyne relapsed into a sort of pensive silence, while Lord Balfour talked pleasantly to the beautiful young girl.

Rena's heart beat high, as amid shoutings, tumult, and confusion their carriage took its place in the long stream of equipages which filled Pall Mall, and seemed to crawl along at a snail's pace, while the pavement was lined with the curious faces of the staring mob. At length they reached St. James' Palace, and Lord Balfour led his mother beneath the court portals and through the stately entrance hall, with Rena following, between lines of brilliantly attired guards and solemn-looking gentlemen, each of whom seemed to have the whole responsibility of their majesty's personal safety on his own individual mind.

The drawing-room upon this particular occasion was unusually crowded—so, at least, the Duchess of St. Burgoyne said—and it was some time before they were able to reach the Throne room, where stood the Prince and Princess of Wales surrounded by the officers of the household, the ladies and gentlemen in waiting, and the high dignitaries of the realm. As they approached the presence, in their turn, Rena felt bewildered and terrified by her own audacity—she was half-tempted to cry out, "Pardon me! forgive me! I am not Lady Blanche Arden, but only poor little Rena Percival! Let me go and hide myself away from human sight!" And then a thrill of mingled terror and delight eddied through her veins as she found herself, she knew not how, courtesying low in response to the gracious greeting of the heir of England and the sweet-faced Princess Alexandra, and then she was somehow passed on to make room for a

plump, Saxon-faced beauty behind her, and the presentation was over!

Yes—the distinction was achieved for which every fair girl in England naturally sighs—the deed was done, and could not be undone, and in her secret heart of hearts Rena Percival was not sorry!

"Such a crowd!" said Lady St. Burgoyne, with a renewed sigh, as she seated herself once more among the yellow silk cushions of the old family carriage. "I declare I thought I never should come out of it alive. But you are as fresh as a rose, my dear—you don't look a bit tired."

"I am not tired," answered Rena, with a bright look of gratitude. "Oh, Lady St. Burgoyne, I have enjoyed it so much!"

"Upon my word," Lady St. Burgoyne said, when she was safe in her own home that evening. "Edith Glenhampton's daughter is the prettiest creature I have seen these ten years. What do you think, Balfour?"

"I quite agree with you, mamma," answered the marquis, who had been sitting in a deep reverie, looking out upon the dreary boughs of the trees opposite.

"And so artless and graceful in her manners," added the duchess. "But I don't understand what could possess Edith to go off and leave her alone in that strange sort of way. I don't like it—it isn't right. But I've a great mind to ask her to come here for the two or three days which I shall stay in town."

"A capital idea," said Lord Balfour, with promptitude. "Let's have the carriage up and go after her at once."

"Balfour," said his mother, gravely, "you're going to fall in love."

He colored slightly, but laughed at the same time.

"Mamma," he said, "that has been your pet horror ever since I was four years old. Can't I possibly get the idea out of your dear old head?"

"Not that I would object to Edith Glenhampton's girl," said Lady St. Burgoyue. "If she is as good as she is pretty, she would be a fitting match for any man."

"Well," said he, with a resigned air, "I never supposed you, of all women in the world, would turn out a match-maker."

"Order the carriage at once," said the duchess, jumping

up. "To think of her being left there alone. I don't know what some mothers are thinking of."

And while the Countess of Glenhampton contentedly imagined that Rena Percival was yawning away her time in the prosaic charge of the Grosvenor Square Mansion, that young damsel was the petted guest of the stately Duchess of St. Burgoyne, half frightened at times, in the consciousness of her own temerity, yet happier than she had ever been before in her life.

"This is the existence that I was born for," she told herself, with secret exultation. "Oh, if I could live on forever thus; but the end will come, sooner or later. Meanwhile, let me be happy. The butterfly lives but for a day—let *my* day too be one of unclouded sunshine."

And when Lady St. Burgoyne went back into the country, she told Rena that she should soon write to Lady Glenhampton to beg a long visit from her young favorite, and so Rena found herself once more alone in the deserted grandeur of Grosvenor square.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE PLOT IS DISCOVERED.

More than three weeks had passed since Lady Glenhampton had left London, and the days were beginning to grow inexpressibly long and wearisome to Rena Percival. She was sitting, one day, curled up on a low velvet cushion, in a bay window, reading a book she had selected out of the library, when the gilt-paneled door opposite opened, and Lady Glenhampton's tall, exquisitely-molded figure stood opposite to her, clad in a traveling suit, with a rich scarf looped lightly across her shoulders.

Rena sprang to her feet at once.

"Miss Percival!" her ladyship enunciated, in accents that betokened a by no means agreeable surprise; "you here still!"

"I am here still," Rena answered, calmly, "in obedience to your ladyship's injunctions."

And Blanche, who was a little behind, ran past her mother, and flew into Rena's arms, crying:

"Oh, Rena, darling! I am so glad to see you once again!"

Rena Percival's face, which had grown hard and cold as stone, softened once more in the dewy sheen of Lady Blanche's soft eyes.

"My dearest!" she murmured, surveying the fair young face with a tender earnestness; "you are better!—you are well!"

"The sea air has done me so much good!" cried Blanche, exultantly. "See! my cheeks are red now! But I am so glad to get back to you again, darling! Come with me to my room, and see what a beautiful shell necklace I have brought you!"

And she dragged Rena away with her, scarcely allowing her to pause long enough to greet Captain Evelyn, who had lounged into the room after his sister.

For once, then, Lady Glenhampton, skillful tactician, though she was, had allowed herself to be out-generaled. She had fully counted upon solitude and neglect having the desired effect of driving Miss Percival back to the protection of Hartford Lodge; and now the danger to Ernest was

more imminent than ever, for there could be no excuse framed for driving him away from his own home, especially as his regiment happened to be quartered close by for a few weeks.

"We will go down to Glenhampton at once," she thought. "Miss Percival cannot have the face to follow us thither once more; or if she does presume to think of it I believe I shall know how to put her in her right place!"

"To Glenhampton so soon, mamma!" cried the puzzled Lady Blanche, who could not comprehend the subtle workings of the elderly lady's mind. "Why, I have not been presented yet! and the lovely emerald green silk has never even been taken out of its box!"

"There will be plenty of other opportunities, my dear," said Lady Glenhampton, quietly; "and I think you need country air and quiet just at present more than the whirl and tumult of a London season. You are young still, and you will lose nothing by waiting. I have given orders about packing to your maid, and we will start the day after to-morrow."

The morrow, during which Lady Blanche would scarcely allow Rena to be out of sight, was spent in shopping, packing, and the numerous other occupations which precede a hurried start, and it was not until evening that the family found time to assemble in the drawing-room, to enjoy a brief season of leisure.

Lady Blanche sat at the piano, singing a pretty little ballad she had picked up on the esplanade at Brighton. Lady Glenhampton reclined in an easy chair, apparently listening to Blanche's music, but in reality uneasily watching Captain Ernest Evelyn, as he hung over Miss Percival's low seat in the bay window.

"She is beautiful," she was forced to confess to herself, as the shaded light fell full on Rena's face, revealing its exquisite curves and classic lines, and contrasting the silky darkness of her hair with the pink and white of her complexion and the carnation redness of her lips; "but not more beautiful than many a woman whom Ernest has passed by without a second thought. I wish I knew the secret of the magic influence she carries with her. Is there actually any foundation of truth in the stories of spells and amulets? One might almost be tempted to believe that she carries one, hidden away somewhere! I wish Blanche had

never seen her! I wish it from the very bottom of my heart!"

While these disjointed thoughts were passing through her mind, the footman entered with a card in his hand.

"For Lady Blanche Arden," he said, looking doubtfully at Rena, who had so carefully instructed him, in the absence of the family, that all cards or messages for Lady Blanche were to be brought directly to her. But Lady Blanche rose from the piano and took the card from its silver salver at once.

"The Marquis of Balfour," she read upon the delicately engraved surface of the slip of cardboard. "Why, mamma, that is Lady St. Burgoyne's son, is it not?"

"To be sure," said the countess. "And it is certainly very attentive of him to call. Show him up at once, Parkinson."

Parkinson bowed and disappeared with his customary "Yes, my lady." And Rena Percival, who had grown first scarlet, and then pale, rose up and sat down again, as if undecided what course to pursue.

"Are you ill, Miss Percival?" asked Captain Evelyn, with solicitude, and Lady Blanche looked up.

"Don't go, Rena, darling," she said; "stay here. It is not probable that Lord Balfour will make a long call."

And as the opposite door opened and Parkinson ushered Lord Balfour into the apartment, Rena leaned back in her seat, closing her eyes, as the victim of the French guillotine might do before the hideous, shining ax descended upon her bared throat. It was too late even to flee away and hide herself now. She must face her fate.

But to Lady Glenhampton's infinite astonishment, the Marquis of Balfour, instead of greeting her, walked straight across the room to Miss Percival.

"Good-evening, Lady Blanche," he said, with bright cordiality.

She looked at him with wild, frightened eyes like those of a hunted deer, but she spoke no word of answer, and Lady Glenhampton instantly interposed.

"There is some mistake, Lord Balfour," she said, courteously. "I am the Countess of Glenhampton, and this is my daughter, Lady Blanche Arden. The young lady whom you are addressing is Miss Percival, my daughter's companion."

Lord Balfour stared at the speaker, as much astounded as a man might be who was told that the sky was scarlet instead of blue.

"Miss Percival?" he repeated, slowly. "Pardon me, Lady Glenhampton, but that must be impossible. This young lady is Lady Blanche Arden, whom my mother had the honor of presenting at court a few days ago."

Lady Glenhampton shrank back slightly.

"He is insane!" she exclaimed, almost before she knew that she was speaking her thoughts aloud.

But at this instant Rena rose, full restored to the presence of mind that had momentarily deserted her.

"I beg your pardon, Lady Glenhampton," she said, coolly; "he is not insane, and to a certain degree he is speaking the truth. You may call it an act of impostorship if you like, or you may phrase it a simple masquerade—the truth is this: I was presented at court by Lady St. Burgoyne, under the name of Lady Blanche Arden."

The Countess of Glenhampton's smooth skin turned almost livid with rage; her black eyes literally blazed with jetty fire as she advanced a step or two and then stood still in front of Miss Percival, who boldly confronted her, secure in the belief that she had friends enough to aid her to weather the gale.

"Miss Percival," she gasped, "do I hear aright? Is it possible that you have dared to assume the name of Lady Blanche Arden—to deceive the Duchess of St. Burgoyne—to appear in the presence of your sovereigns under a false name? No; I cannot believe it!"

"You may believe it," Rena answered, calmly, "for it is every word of it true!"

As she spoke she lifted her soft, liquid eyes appealingly to Lord Balfour's shocked face.

"You will not judge me for a childish freak which has done no actual harm?" she murmured, softly. "I know it was wrong, but—but I could not resist the temptation. Only say that you forgive me."

"It is not necessary to say it," he answered, frankly, as he pressed her hand, and she knew that, as far as he was concerned, she was safe.

"Rena!" Lady Blanche questioned, drawing near to her friend and looking at her with surprised eyes, "is it true?"

"It *is* true, Blanche. Have I forfeited your love?"

"You know better than to ask that question," said Blanche, reproachfully. "It was nothing but a jest—but I do not comprehend how you could ever have had the courage."

"By Jove! it's the pluckiest thing I ever heard of!" cried Captain Evelyn, pulling his long mustaches and looking triumphantly round, as if he were delighted at Rena's prowess. "So you cheated 'em all, did you? Why, it's as good as half the things one sees in the newspapers."

"It was foolish," said Rena, in a voice that was plaintively sweet, "and I have regretted it since; but——"

"Foolish!" echoed Lady Glenhampton, severely; "I should think as much! Foolish is no word to express it—it is disgraceful, criminal, outrageous! A girl who can thus set truth and decorum doubly at defiance is no fit companion for the Earl of Glenhampton's daughter!"

"Nay, Lady Glenhampton," interposed Lord Balfour, "you are too severe upon what was, after all, a mere girlish freak. Miss Percival has scarcely deserved so rigid a judgment."

Lady Glenhampton bit her lower lip until the white rows of teeth nearly met—but Lord Balfour's kindly-meant intercession restored her to something like outward composure. She reseated herself once more, with an artificial smile, and without another glance toward Rena Percival began to question him concerning his mother the duchess, and to converse on various topics of current interest.

But while Lord Balfour talked he never ceased to watch the beautiful face of the fair young culprit, whose pretty drooping air of penitence amused as well as fascinated him.

"I suppose I ought to be angry with her for so elaborately and systematically deceiving us," he thought, "but I cannot, for the life of me, think of anything but a pretty child who has been naughty, and promises, with tears in his eyes, 'never to do so again!'"

And when he finally took his leave he held Rena's hand with a gently significant pressure in his own, as he said:

"Although Lady Blanche Arden seems miraculously to have lost her identity, I hope I may still number Miss Percival among the list of my friends!"

She answered him only by a mute, pleading look, but that

last courteous speech angered Lady Glenhampton more deeply, if it were possible, than all that had gone before.

"Miss Percival," she said, with freezing hauteur, when the door had safely closed behind Lord Balfour, "you will of course perceive that this audacious piece of impertinence on your part must part us at once and forever. I have endured much from you already, but I never imagined you could be so lost to all sense of propriety as you have proved since our departure for Brighton. You will leave this house to-morrow morning. My carriage shall convey you to Hartford Lodge, for although you have forfeited all claim to my consideration, I would not willingly turn you into the streets!"

Rena sank back on the low chair from which she had risen to bid the Marquis of Balfour farewell.

"Lady Glenhampton," she said, the pearl-bright tears trickling from between the fingers with which she covered her deadly pale face, "I am homeless and friendless—you have the power to insult me as you will!"

"By Jove, but she hasn't, though!" cried Captain Evelyn, stepping boldly into the breach. "I, for one, will not stand tamely by and hear you called names, even by my own mother. If the carriage takes you away to-morrow, I'll be hanged if it doesn't take me, too, and I swear I'll never cross this threshold again!"

And he looked as if he were fully in earnest. Blanche, too, had advanced to Rena's side, and taken her head upon her bosom.

"Not friendless, dear, as long as you have me by your side," she murmured, softly. "Rena, they shall not part me from you, the dearest companion I ever had! Mamma," she added, looking resolutely up, "if Rena goes back to Hartford Lodge I shall accompany her thither. She shall not go alone! The eternal friendship we have vowed to each other would be worth but little if I were to desert her now."

"But, Blanche, she has deceived you—she has taken your very name shamelessly on herself."

"Because she knew I would cheerfully give her that, as well as anything else I have in the world," Blanche rejoined. "Mamma, I am like Lord Balfour—I do not see that she has done anything so very terrible, after all."

Lady Glenhampton stood there, impotent and helpless in her rage as a chained tigress. Was this bold, beautiful

young adventuress to defy her after all, and with the weapons of her own children's love?

"Ernest," she said, "you are surely not serious in what you said just now?"

"Never was more serious in my life," said the young dragoon, stormily twisting his mustaches as if he were determined to pluck them out by the roots.

"Will you tell me what it is to you?" fiercely gasped the countess, "whether this girl returns to her native sphere, or continues to brazen it out here in a position in which she has shown that she does not know how to comport herself decently?"

"It's so much to me that I don't mean to stand here like a white-livered hound and hear her abused!" returned Captain Evelyn, hotly. "I respect and admire her more than I can find any words to tell, and, though you were my mother fifty times over, I would not allow you to treat her in any way save that in which the highest lady of the land should be treated. Now you've got my opinion, and I hope you are satisfied."

He looked with a dogged determination at his mother as he spoke, and Rena Percival lifted her exultant eyes in a sort of triumphant defiance to her high-born enemy at the same moment.

"Shall I go or stay?" she asked, speaking to the Countess of Glenhampton, but looking at Blanche and Ernest.

"Stay!" they both repeated, in one breath, and Lady Glenhampton's arms fell helplessly by her side, while a sharp pang, like that which mortally wounded people feel, seemed to transfix her breast.

"Shall I go or stay?" she repeated, looking Lady Glenhampton this time full in the face. "I will only accept my verdict from your lips."

"Stay!" Lady Glenhampton murmured, but the word was wrung from the very bitterness of her heart.

Rena Percival had won the victory! Lady Glenhampton's own children, for whom she had done and dared, and suffered so much, sided with this bold, beautiful stranger against her!

CHAPTER XX.

REJECTED LOVERS.

Rena Percival returned to Glenhampton Castle, and the countess, inwardly disliking—nay, almost dreading her—found herself obliged to preserve an outward semblance of courtesy and sweetness.

They had been scarcely ten days at the castle when, one sunny April afternoon, Lord Balfour rode up to the door on his beautiful milk-white horse Rajah. Rena, who chanced to be sitting alone in the shadow of the budding linden trees, burst into a joyous exclamation of surprise.

"So you did not expect to see me?" said the marquis, his face brightening at the earnestness of her welcome, as he sprang from his horse and threw his reins to the solemn groom in blue and buff livery, who was riding behind.

"No," she answered frankly, as she extended her hand, "I did not think I should ever see you again, Lord Balfour."

"Why not?"

"Because," and the carmine glow spread over her cheek, beneath the downcast lashes, "I feared I had forfeited all right to your kindly recollection or friendship."

"As if I were such a stern judge as that! No, Miss Percival; I extend no such severe censorship over a young girl's frolic."

He sat down beside her on the long carved settee. Rena hesitated a moment.

"The countess and Lady Blanche are within," she said.

"We will go to them presently," said Lord Balfour. "Meanwhile the spring air and the fine view of yonder budding copses are quite worthy of our enjoyment."

"I hope the duchess is well," said Rena, hesitatingly.

"She is well, thanks."

"I am sure she has not forgiven me!" said Rena, picking ruthlessly at a branch of faintly-odorous heliotrope that was pinned in her belt.

"She was a little vexed at first—no one likes to find themselves willfully deceived you know—but she has reached such a pitch of philosophy at present that she can laugh as heartily at the burlesque as you yourself."

"Do you think so meanly of me that you can fancy I can laugh at my own folly and deceit?" asked Rena, indignantly.

"Nay, those are too harsh terms to use. However, we will not discuss the question. I am staying at Vyvyan Court just at present, and when I told my mother before leaving Balfour House that I should probably find my way over here to call, she bade me give you her love. So you see you are quite forgiven, little amateur actress though you were!"

"She is very kind," said Rena, in a low voice, "but I do not think I deserve her leniency. Shall we go in now?"

And she rose so resolutely that, although Lord Balfour would infinitely have preferred to prolong the *tete-a-tete*, he could find no excuse. Somehow this fair young companion of Lady Blanche Arden had possessed in his eyes a nameless, unanalyzed attraction which had never, in his eyes, belonged to title dame, or dweller around the steps of the English throne.

His stay at Vyvyan Court, originally designed only to be of a few days' durance, lengthened itself out into weeks, and there were few bright days when he did not manage to find his way to Glenhampton Castle on one pretext or another; and Rena Percival began, unconsciously, to look forward to his visits, and to feel disappointed when he did not come.

In the midst of this unwritten idyl, a new element entered into the daily life at Glenhampton Castle. A bevy of visitors from London came down, and among them were Captain Ernest Evelyn and Lord Vere Temple.

"Fate is determined to undo all my plans!" thought Lady Glenhampton, despairingly. But she was not one to abandon her post while there was yet the shadow of a hope to cling to.

"Ernest," she said, as she came upon him in the entrance hall the evening after his arrival, "where are you going?"

"To smoke in the shrubberies, mother."

"Then I will walk with you. No; do not throw away your cigar."

And she passed her arm caressingly through his as she led him out into the graveled walk leading to a secluded mass of foreign shrubs, where the purple spring twilight made a sort of enchanted light.

"Ernest," she said, "your father is coming home soon."

"My stepfather, you mean," corrected the young man, carelessly, biting off the end of his cigar.

"He has been to you all that any father could be," said Lady Glenhampton, with a little sigh, "but I am almost afraid to show him those last bills of yours."

"Lord Glenhampton knows that a man can't keep up any position in London without some expense," said Captain Evelyn, slightly shrugging his shoulders.

"Some expense, yes; but not such extravagance as yours has been. My dear boy," she added, looking anxiously up in his face, "do you know how this sort of thing can possibly be expected to continue? You have no property of your own, and Lord Glenhampton, kind as he is, will some day be compelled, in self-defense, to put a limit to your expenditures."

"But what is a fellow to do, mother?" asked Ernest, somewhat impatiently. "I can't coin gold, neither do I know of any strong room full of diamonds that I can storm at the point of the bayonet!"

"Ernest, you must marry rich."

"Very easy to say so, but heiresses are not like blackberries, growing on every bush."

"Georgine Cardiff is staying at Vyvyan Court, and she has a hundred thousand pounds in her own right."

"But Vyvyan Court is such a duse of a way off!"

"Only eight miles; and besides she is coming over to-morrow to stay a couple of weeks with Blanche. Ernest, if one has really any energy at all, much may be done in two weeks."

"A man might hang himself in less time than that," observed Captain Evelyn, sagely.

"I don't see the connection of ideas," said the countess, irritably.

"But I do," nodded Ernest. "There, mother, don't look vexed. I'll do my best to entertain the Cardiff, to the utmost of my ability. Don't I always try to make myself agreeable to all your guests?"

"Yes, Ernest, but——"

At this moment they came upon Mr. Poynings strolling up the long walk on the way to the castle, and Lady Glenhampton, rather reluctantly, turned back under his escort. She would fain have continued her walk with Ernest, but the young dragoon would not hear of it.

"Upon my word, mother, you should not be out in this evening air!" he said, earnestly. "It's very bad for any one

with the slightest tendency to weakness of the lungs, isn't it, Poynings?"

"Indeed, Lady Glenhampton, Captain Evelyn is right," said the lawyer, smoothly, as he proffered his arm.

"But you are coming back, Ernest," said Lady Glenhampton, anxiously.

"Presently, as soon as I have smoked my cigar out! *Au revoir!*" and Captain Evelyn waved his hand gayly to his mother.

No sooner were the countess and Mr. Poynings out of sight, however, than Ernest Evelyn threw his cigar into a clump of magnificent glossy leaved rhododendrons and quickened his pace from a saunter into an earnest, energetic stride. He had overheard Rena Percival mention to his sister that morning that she intended to walk down into the village after dinner to see a little sick child in whom she was interested, and he was eager to enjoy the walk back with her.

Nor was he disappointed. Close to the northern park gates, sentineled by a handsome lodge built of cream-colored stone, he met Miss Percival.

"Alone?" he asked, as careless as if he had naturally supposed she would be accompanied by an escort.

"Yes," she answered.

"Then I may walk home with you?"

"Certainly," she answered, lightly. "Any company is better than the ghost which is said to haunt Glenhampton Park after dark!"

"Not particularly complimentary to me."

"But true, nevertheless. Captain Evelyn," said Rena, gravely, "have you known me so long without knowing that I never pay compliments?"

"I don't want any compliments to-night," said the officer of dragoons. "I want you to be sincere, Miss Percival——"

"Which I always try to be, Captain Evelyn," she interrupted, rather mischievously.

"For I have something to say to you," he went on—"something on which the whole of my future life may depend!"

"Oh, dear," thought Rena, wringing her little white hands in the starlight, "he's going to make love to me, and I haven't the least idea what to say to him!"

But she said nothing, only walked along, looking very stately and dignified.

"And it is this," he added, seeing that no convenient verbal halting-place offered itself: "Miss Percival, I love you, and I would fain make you my wife."

In the momentary silence that ensued, Ernest Evelyn fancied that she could hear the strong, tumultuous throbbing of his heart.

"I dare say I've said it awkwardly," he went on. "I never possessed the gift of expression that some fellows have; but not the smoothest talker of them all could love you more dearly and earnestly than I do."

"Captain Evelyn," said Rena, hurriedly, "please unsay what you have just told me. Let me believe that it is all a mistake—a misinterpretation of your own feelings!"

"I love you," he repeated, slowly, "as a man never loves but once in his life. Miss Percival, I cannot unsay it, for it is a part of my very existence. Give me my answer. I cannot endure the suspense very long. Tell me, yes or no—will you be my wife?"

"No!" she answered, calmly.

"Why not?" he demanded, turning upon her almost savagely.

"Because I do not love you. Is not that reason enough?"

"It would be a good match for you in the eyes of the world, Rena," he persisted, scarcely able to realize that he had actually been rejected by his sister's companion.

"I do not care for the world."

"Rena," he exclaimed, speaking in the low, husky voice of intense passion, "you have been playing double. You think that Lord Vere Temple's wealth and position would be a brighter prize than the devotion of a poor soldier. But you are mistaken there—Vere Temple is as good as the betrothed bridegroom of Lady Blanche Arden, and if he dares to flirt with any other woman alive, I would as soon put a bullet through his brain as to shoot down a partridge. You had better beware, and so I warn you!"

"I do not need your warning," Rena answered, with quiet dignity. "Lord Vere Temple is nothing to me. Captain Evelyn, you were my friend before, you are fast forfeiting all claim to that title now."

"Rena! Rena!" he moaned, in broken accents. "I have been a mad fool—an idiot—but you will not treasure it in

your heart against me! You will give me yet another opportunity to regain the place in your esteem I have so insanely lost. Let me come to you a month hence for my answer, and in the meantime try to love me a little in return for the undivided homage of my whole heart."

"Neither months nor years would work any change in my feelings," she answered, resolutely. "Captain Evelyn, I have given you my final decision, and I forbid you to accompany me any farther!"

She walked on, with royal step and dignified mien, never once turning her head back toward the spot where Ernest Evelyn stood, white as a marble statue, and full of a blank, yearning despair.

"Poor fellow!" she thought; "yet, had I worded it more gently, he would, inevitably, have construed pity into a warmer feeling. I do believe he loved me, and yet my soul could never have recognized in him the master-spirit of its existence. A month ago I believe I should have accepted him in exultant pride at being the chosen wife of Lady Glenhampton's son and Lady Blanche Arden's brother; now, all the world bears a different aspect to me."

She could feel her face glow in the semi-darkness of the balmy spring evening, as she asked herself the question why this was so. She could feel the soft, muffled beatings of her heart, and was content that it should be thus.

"Miss Percival!"

She started convulsively, with a slight cry of terror, as the shubbery rustled at her side, and a tall figure stood close to her, but the next instant she recognized Lord Vere Temple.

"I am a careless blockhead to frighten you thus, Miss Percival," he said, evidently much vexed with himself; "but I wanted to see you before you reached the house."

"Is any one ill?" she asked, pausing abruptly.

"Not that I am aware of. Why?"

"I could only conclude from your manner that you were the messenger of evil things," she answered, dryly.

He laughed.

"My manner must be peculiarly unfortunate," he said. "Perhaps you have not perceived that I have been trying to secure a private interview with you for the last few days?"

"I have not perceived it," she answered, curtly; "nor can

I imagine why you should desire any such unprofitable way of spending your time."

"Perhaps, Miss Percival, if you were to hear me out——"

"But I do not wish to hear you out!" interrupted Rena, with a vehemence that only gave additional charm to her piquant manner. "Whatever you wish to say to me had better be said in the presence of the other guests at Glenhampton Castle, and any private interviews you may have, must be with Lady Blanche Arden rather than with Rena Percival."

"Miss Rena Percival, you are exceedingly frank," said Lord Vere, with an air of undisguised chagrin.

"And I intended to be. Have I offended you, Lord Vere?"

"I suppose I ought to be offended," he answered, after a second's hesitation.

"Not at all," said Rena, changing her voice from its cold, hard ring to a deliciously coaxing intonation. "We have always been excellent friends, Lord Vere—we are not going to be enemies now."

"*Friends?*" he asked, meaningly.

"Yes, only friends. Do we part thus?"

She held out her hand. He took it as frankly as it was offered, and so Lord Vere Temple's love-making was nipped remorselessly in the bud.

Blanche Arden did not see her friend until late that night, when Rena came into her room.

"Well, my dear Blanche," she asked, pressing her cool lips to Lady Blanche's forehead, "what sort of an evening have you had?"

"A delightful one!" answered Lady Blanche, enthusiastically; "but where were you?"

"Oh, wandering about in the starlight like a lost spirit! And how did you amuse yourself?"

"Singing to Vere, most of the time, I believe," the young girl answered, shyly. "Dear Rena, you can't think how delightful it was—he seemed to have resumed his old tender manner. I think he does like me a little after all!"

"A great deal, I should judge," said Rena. "Remember about the bridesmaid promise, Blanche!"

"I will not forget," whispered Blanche. "And Rena—you will let me tell you, won't you, for it was such a wicked

fancy, and I can't rest until I have unburdened my abominable little heart of it!"

"What was it?" asked Rena, caressingly, touching the bright hair of the girl.

"I fancied at one time—of course it was all my imagination, dearest—that he liked you, and that you would have been pleased to be Lady Vere Temple!"

"What a ridiculous idea!" said Rena, with the utmost gravity.

"Was it not?" cooed the happy young creature, secure in her own empire of youth and love. "Of course I know it now, but I was very wretched at one time!"

"And served you right!" said Rena. "Now, Blanche, listen to me—whatever may happen in the future, and no one can tell what possibility lies before us—never doubt or disbelieve in me again! Promise me this!"

And Blanche Arden, holding her friend close to her heart, murmured softly and fervently:

"I promise!"

Lady Glenhampton went to her son's room that night, after the drawing-room circle had broken up, and the guests dispersed—perhaps she had something more to say to him about Miss Cardiff, the Welsh heiress—and tapped softly at the door.

"Come in!" he called, recklessly.

She pushed open the door and entered. The lights were flaring to and fro in the draughts from the open window—the floor was strewn with the disorderly concomitants of packing, while Captain Evelyn sat in an easy-chair, pale and haggard, directing the actions of Hermann, his servant, who knelt before an open valise.

"Ernest!" she exclaimed, stopping short in her amazement.

"Is it you, mother? Sit down—there's room enough here somewhere, I suppose," and he pushed a pile of books from a cushioned chair.

"But what does it mean, Ernest? You are not going away?"

"Yes, I am!" he answered, moodily.

"Where?"

"I don't know—to Jericho, for all I care! Anywhere away from this place!"

"But, Ernest, Miss Cardiff is coming to-morrow!"

"Let her come—she is nothing to me."

"Ernest," exclaimed Lady Glenhampton, beginning to be seriously alarmed, "what is the matter?"

"Don't ask me any questions, mother," he answered, with an impatient backward toss of his hair. "I'm tired of Glenhampton, and I'm going away."

"Is not this a sudden resolution, Ernest?"

"All my resolutions are sudden, mother, I believe," he answered, with a mirthless laugh.

"But what will our guests think?"

"What they please—it is quite indifferent to me."

"What can I say to them? What will Miss Cardiff suppose? Oh, Ernest, reconsider this mad freak of yours!" she pleaded, putting her hand appealingly upon his shoulder.

"It is no freak, mother, but a settled purpose," he replied. "Make what excuses you please—you never were at a loss yet for a subterfuge. I am off by to-morrow morning's train."

And all Lady Glenhampton's entreaties were but as idle air to prevail on him to alter his determination. Long before the guests at the castle had assembled round the next morning's breakfast-table Captain Evelyn was miles away, steaming over the iron track of the Northwestern railway.

CHAPTER XXI.

RENA PERCIVAL'S SISTER.

The June roses that mantled the gray stone walls of Tregarvan Rectory were a sheet of crimson bloom—the sunny air was musical with the hum of gold-belted bees, and the humming-birds darted in and out of the foliage like animated blossoms.

Alice Percival was sitting on the doorstep, feeding a brood of hungry little ducklings, that swarmed fearlessly around her feet, with crumbs of soaked bread, quite unconscious of the pretty picture she made.

"Come here, you little truant," she said, half aloud, to one small downy creature, who persisted in running round the edge of the doorstep after an imaginary fly, which had long since made good its escape. "You are like the rest of the world—too ready to barter substance for shadow."

She took the tiny, struggling thing in her gentle hand as she spoke, and set it down among its brethren. Little Agnes Eskett came out at the same moment, her face full of beaming importance.

"Miss Percival," she said, gleefully, "we are going to have company."

"Are we?" said Alice. "But are we going to have our Latin verbs more perfect to-day than they were yesterday?"

"No; but don't you want to know who is coming?" said the little girl.

"Well, no; I am not particularly curious upon the subject, Agnes."

"It's Captain Evelyn."

"Captain Evelyn!" Alice sat up now, and left the nine yellow little ducklings to quarrel over the bowl of soaked bread at their leisure. "From Glenhampton Castle?"

"Yes," assented Agnes, delighted to have succeeded in attracting her governess' attention at last. "Papa had a telegram this morning asking him to send to the station for the noon train. Wouldn't you like to ride over in the car, Miss Percival?"

"No; it would be too warm," said Alice, her heart throb-

bing, nevertheless, at the idea of news from Rena. "Has Captain Evelyn ever been here before, Agnes?"

"Oh, yes; he used to be papa's little pupil years ago, and he often comes to visit us. He's real nice; he knows lots of games, and he taught us croquet the last time he was here. Phebe says she's going to be his little wife."

While Agnes was imparting this morsel of news to her governess Mrs. Eskett was in the study hurrying her husband on his journey to the station to meet the expected guest.

When, two hours later, the Rev. Mr. Eskett returned to Tregarvan Rectory, accompanied by Captain Evelyn, Mrs. Eskett received her husband's former pupil with the smiling cordiality that seemed inherent in her nature; the little girls ran to meet him, each striving which should be foremost to receive his kiss, and it was not until he entered the the shady sitting-room that he saw a slight figure, sitting, as it were, in a background of roses by the open window—a figure all in white, with bright brown hair and eyes of the softest violet gray, but nevertheless so startlingly like Rena Percival that he stopped abruptly.

"Oh, I forgot," said Mrs. Eskett, advancing at the same moment, "you have not been introduced to my friend, Miss Percival. Alice, this is Captain Evelyn!"

"Miss Percival!" muttered Ernest, contriving to bow, although he felt as if he were in a dream. Had he fled resolutely, from the presence of one beautiful enchantress, only to meet her double in the wild solitudes of the Welsh hills? A bewildered sensation stole over his brain—the room swam around him for an instant, while Alice Percival's lovely face seemed to look at him from misty clouds! And then little Emily Eskett ran up to him with one of the downy ducklings in her hand to call his attention to its marvelous developments of web feet; the fair apparition glided away, and the charm was momentarily dispelled.

"Miss Percival," he repeated, turning to Mrs. Eskett. "My sister has a friend staying with her, at the castle, of that name—they are relatives, I presume."

"They are sisters,' said Mrs. Eskett. "Did your sister's friend never tell you that Alice was our governess here?"

"Never!"

"That is strange, too," said the rector's wife. "But she is a very lovely girl, and we are delighted with her."

"How long has she been with you?" asked Captain Evelyn.

"Nearly a year."

Captain Ernest Evelyn had no opportunity to see much more of Rena's sister until late in the afternoon, when she came out with a basket of roses in her hand, her beautiful face shaded with a broad-brimmed straw hat.

"They are wonderfully alike," he thought, as he watched her light figure move down the garden walk with a sort of swaying grace. "But Rena is a lovely landscape seen in the glow of sunshine, and this girl is like the same thing by moonlight! Yet there is a marvelous similarity."

As the thoughts passed through his mind, he rose and advanced courteously toward the girl.

"Let me carry the basket, Miss Percival?"

"I am only going a little way," said Alice, shrinking and coloring, for her secluded life at Tregarvan Rectory had unused her to society.

"But it is too heavy for you to carry even a little way," he rejoined, laughingly. "Even roses have weight, and I should judge by the avoirdupois of the basket there is something more substantial beneath."

"You are right," said Alice, laughing, as the pleasant nonchalance of his manner restored her own ease; "it is a basket of good things which Mrs. Eskett wishes carried to old Paul Powis, who is ill with the rheumatism, and lives just beyond the hill."

"Do you know, Miss Percival," said Ernest, as he walked along, "that you are wonderfully like your sister!"

Alice looked up, with a bright smile and a blush.

"I was wishing to ask you about Rena," she said. "It is several weeks since I received a letter from her. Is she well?"

"Quite well, I believe."

"And happy?"

"How can any one fail to be happy who receives such universal homage as she?" asked Captain Evelyn, with a hidden accent of bitterness that Alice failed to comprehend. "My sister Blanche worships her; she reigns at Glenhampton Castle as if she were a crowned queen. Happy! Of course she is happy!"

"She deserves it," said Alice enthusiastically.

"I do not doubt that in the least," Captain Evelyn answered.

"Does she ever speak of me?" asked Alice, her loving heart still yearning for some definite, circumstantial news of Rena.

"She has told me that she had a sister who was a governess, but she never told me that she was at Tregarvan Rectory."

CHAPTER XXII.

MISS CLIVE'S ROOM.

Miss Georgine Cardiff, the famous heiress, had just sauntered into the breakfast-room at Glenhampton Castle. She was a large, fair girl, with languid blue eyes, golden hair, and features too full for beauty. But people told Georgine she was handsome, and she had somehow fallen into a habit of believing what people told her. She was good-natured, after her dull, undemonstrative way, and one of her most active fancies of late was an enthusiastic devotion to Rena Percival.

"You are so pretty, you see!" said the heiress. "And I do so like to look at you. In a different style from me, of course—people can't all be alike—but I somehow think we seem to set each other off."

She was delighted to see Rena in the breakfast-room as she entered.

"You were waiting for me, weren't you, darling?" she cried, gleefully. "I always like some one to talk to me when I eat my breakfast. Who is that riding up to the door—I can hear the sound of horses' feet on the gravel? Perhaps it is Captain Evelyn come back!"

Georgine's face grew radiant at the rather improbable idea, for she had been sorely disappointed at the unaccountable defection of her promised cavalier, but a card brought to her presently dispelled the illusion.

"The Marquis of Balfour," she read, and underneath were the penciled words "By leave to deliver a message to Miss Cardiff, from Mrs. Vyvyan, of the Court."

"Ask him to come up here," said Georgine, complacently. "How do I look, Rena? Is my sash straight behind? Oh, do lend me that delicious little blue bow of yours for my hair, there's a love! Lord Balfour was exceedingly polite to me when I was staying with dear Kate Vyvyan, and I sometimes fancy—it's a ridiculous idea, isn't it, Rena?—that he admires me particularly. But where are you going, dear?" Georgine stared with wide-open, pale blue eyes at Miss Percival as she moved toward the door.

"To my own room, Georgine. Lord Balfour's call is not intended for me."

"But——"

Rena stayed to hear no more, and not until she was safe in the corridors did she pause to ask herself why she had fled thus precipitately from the presence of the man she most respected and esteemed in all the world. Her heart throbbed convulsively, the color glowed on her cheek, and even the distant sound of a servant's foot on the stairs made her start.

"I must see him no more," Rena thought. "If he does not care for me, all associations that tend to feed this inward fever at my heart must be broken off; if he does—then there will be all the more reason that we should henceforward be as strangers to each other!"

She stood leaning over the carved balustrade, when a door close to her opened, and Miss Clive's tall, dark, solid figure glided out. She started with a slight cry.

"You need not be afraid, Rena Percival," said Miss Clive, with a bitter smile. "I am neither ghost nor witch, although I believe some of the people in Glenhampton take me for both the one and the other."

"I was not afraid," Rena answered, "but I never knew there were any doors behind those folds of tapestry."

"You are not initiated in all the mysteries of the castle yet," Miss Clive rejoined. "In all the months you have sojourned at Glenhampton, you have never seen my room?"

"No," Miss Percival answered, doubtfully.

"Would you like to see it?"

"If you choose to show it to me."

Antonia Clive lifted a heavy fold of tapestry, and opened a door behind it.

"Enter," she said, briefly, and, with a vivid sensation of curiosity, Rena Percival followed her into the apartment kept so secret from the rest of the world.

She shuddered as she looked around, and well she might, for the hangings and draperies of the room were of black serge, the carpet of black, and the furniture of ebony wood upholstered in black velvet.

"Does it seem gloomy to you?" Miss Clive asked, watching Rena's face with keen, glittering eyes.

"It seems like a tomb!" the girl answered, involuntarily.

"It *is* a tomb," Miss Clive said, in low, impressive tones; "the tomb of my buried heart and hope. Oh, Rena Percival, you are young as yet, but if you had lived ten long years of despair, as I have done, you would learn to wonder what God's sunshine means, and why his vengeance does not come down upon the blood-stained head of the guilty murderer!"

"Do you mean——"

"I mean but one thing," the strange, pale woman interrupted, sharply. "My life has but one signification. I refer to the murderer of Arthur Hunsworth. Sit down there, Rena Percival."

She drew forward one of the black walnut chairs, and Rena seated herself, wondering what was coming next, and half regretting that she had allowed herself to be conducted into this casket of funereal gloom.

"You know the story of my bereavement," she began, briefly, as she stood before her guest. "You have been told how, upon the very day previous to that appointed for my wedding, I came suddenly upon the corpse of my murdered lover! It is no secret at Glenhampton—everybody must have heard of it!"

"I know it," Rena answered. "Blanche Arden has told it all to me."

"That is the beginning of the story," said Miss Clive. "The end is yet to come."

"The end?" repeated Rena, questioningly.

"The end comes only upon the day in which I shall drink the cup of vengeance to the dregs," said Antonia, with slow, frightful emphasis. "See here."

With a key which she drew from her bosom she unlocked

a drawer in her ebony wood *escritoire* and took out a small dagger, with red, rusty stains upon its tarnished blade, and a handle of antique yellow ivory curiously carved in imitation of a turning serpent, with eyes of emerald, while the body of the serpent was covered with fine hieroglyphic chasings in black, save where the influence of time had worn them away into comparative smoothness.

"What are those stains?" Rena asked, as she looked shudderingly at the deadly instrument.

"Blood!" Miss Clive answered in a whisper; "the blood of Arthur Hunsworth!"

"How do you know?" cried Rena, recoiling as if the gore were still fresh and warm upon the blade.

"How do I know that there is a heaven above us—a place of departed spirits beyond? I know it, and that is enough. Moreover, I will tell you more," and again she lowered her voice to a whisper. "I found this dagger, days after they had laid him in his bloody grave—found it, deep down in the tangled roots and fern, where I had searched before with no result. But I was never discouraged. I knew that if I persevered *he* would give me some sign, some token from the silence of the grave. Every inch of that ground was gone over again and again by those whose business it was to probe the mystery to the bottom. Why was it left for *me* to find this thing by which the deed was done, when all hope was given over? I tell you the hand of fate was in it!"

She pressed the blade to her lips ere she laid it back in the drawer.

"You wonder to see me do that," she said, reading the unconcealable expression of Rena's face. "But you would not if you knew all it has been to me. It spoke to me out of the gloom of mystery—it will yet point out to me the clear path to vengeance! No one knows of its existence save you and me!"

"But," asked Rena, "why do you not consult others?"

"I *have* consulted others—I consulted them when Arthur Hunsworth's dead body lay in this house, and twelve gentlemen of the land in council assembled as a coroner's jury, proved to me the utter folly and impotence of human skill and reason. Do you suppose I will trust my chances to them again? Never! I don't know why I have showed it to you—perhaps because the necessity of some voice or look of sympathy was strong in my soul. I have

acted from an impulse which I cannot explain to myself. Nor do I regret it," she added, dreamily.

"Still," said Rena, following up the chain of thought that was in her mind, "the dagger is but one link in the evidence!"

"The rest will surely be forthcoming," said Miss Clive, with a sort of blind reliance that seemed like instinct. "I am only waiting! The day will come, and the hour, in which my hand shall deal the vengeance which has been so long in ripening. The world is a world of mysteries, but the clew to them all will come in time. Else, why am I suffered to live on when heart and life and secret hope have been dead so long?"

She stood there like a Sibyl of old, and Rena Percival felt a sensation of awe creep slowly through her veins as she sat watching her and listening to her slowly spoken words. Her unshaken faith was contagious in its influence. Rena, too, felt herself drawn into the current—*she* believed, also, that Antonia Clive was not biding her time in vain. Miss Clive saw the effect her words had produced, and smiled triumphantly.

"Miss Percival," said she, "I have been studying you all these months, although you have not known it. I think that those who, like me, live secluded from the world, become adepts in the book of human nature, and judge by many trifles, to which others would scarcely pause to give a thought. I have read your character, and I like you. It is not so with Edith Glenhampton."

"No," said Rena, smiling contemptuously, "*she* hates me!"

"Ah! you have found it out for yourself, then," said Miss Clive. "Come, I will not keep you any longer in this temple of death."

"Glenhampton Castle is full of strange, hidden nooks," said Rena, as she preceded Miss Clive out into the hall. "I think its every corner is familiar to me, and then, all of a sudden, I come across some new mystery. I have never yet seen those rooms in the upper part of the Haunted Tower."

"Have you not?" asked Miss Clive, with some appearance of interest lighting up her dull, corpse-like face. "They are worth seeing. I remember as much as that in the old times, although I have never been in them since *he* died. Some day we will go there together."

"But Lady Glenhampton always keeps the keys in her own possession," said Rena.

"We will get them from her; she never refuses anything to me."

CHAPTER XXIII.

"NEVER."

If Rena Percival supposed that by any reserve or seclusion on her own part she could interpose a barrier between herself and Lord Balfour's evidently increasing admiration she judged on very insufficient premises. Love was a late-growing plant in the marquis' life; nor had he any idea that it should be ruthlessly blasted in the bud without his knowing why.

George Wargran, the Marquis of Balfour, was one whose existence had been comparatively valueless to him up to the present time. It was true that he possessed wealth and rank. It was also true that he bore one of the oldest names in the kingdom, and was heir-apparent to the noble dukedom of St. Burgoyne, with its estates, residences, and hereditary privileges; but these, to a person of his peculiar temperament, were not sufficient in themselves. His life as a boy and a youth had not been over pleasant; for, although his mother was one of Nature's noble women, and one whom he could love and respect with all the force of his enthusiastic nature, his other parent had fallen far short in his estimation of a man's true position. The present Duke of St. Burgoyne was a petty tyrant—a man of violent passions, jealous suspicion, and repulsive manners. He had hated his son because Lord Balfour was frank, true and noble—in every respect a contrast to himself. He disliked his wife because he was never able to comprehend the loftiness of her nature as compared to his own; and it was a relief to both the duchess and her son when Lord St. Burgoyne de-

cided to accept a high diplomatic position at the court of Vienna, and left England, as it happened, forever. And it was with the wretchedness of his own patrician home in his memory that Lord Balfour resolved never to marry, but to devote himself entirely for the rest of their natural lives to his mother.

Notwithstanding his resolution, he was forced, at last, to acknowledge to himself that his heart was captivated by the liquid brown eyes, rose-leaf cheeks, and bird-like voice of a girl who had neither descent nor fortune; who had set etiquette, propriety, and truth itself equally at defiance, and who occupied a position not even so well defined as that of companion to the Lady Blanche Arden.

"Balfour!" said the Duchess of St. Burgoyne, solemnly, when her son, who had never been able to keep a secret from her since he was four years old, frankly confessed to her the new idea which had taken possession of his mind, "I believe you are crazy!"

"You cannot believe it any more sincerely than I do, mamma," owned up the marquis, with a comical uplifting of his eyebrows; "but it is a very pleasant sort of insanity!"

"Do you really love that girl well enough to make her your wife?"

"Yes," he answered, gravely, "I do."

"Why, then," said the duchess, "there's but one thing for you to do in the matter."

"To go to Florence, or St. Petersburgh, or the shores of the Nile, I suppose you will say?" asked Balfour.

"No; to marry her!"

"That is just what I have made up my mind to do," observed Lord Balfour; "that is, if she will honor me so far as to accept my offer.

"She will do that fast enough," said the duchess, with that blind confidence in the superior attractions of her son, as far as those of the opposite sex were concerned, which we often see in mothers. And, really, in this particular case, she had some reason for believing in her son.

"I am not so sure of that," observed the marquis; "but if I should be sufficiently fortunate to win her consent, you will give her a welcome to Balfour House?"

"Of course I will," answered the duchess, with hearty cordiality. "The woman who is worthy to be my son's wife, is worthy of a place in my heart, also."

"You are the dearest old mamma in the world," said Lord Balfour, with a warm caress.

And thus strengthened in the cause in which he was already so determined, Lord Balfour set out for Glenhampton Castle, resolved to strike at least one doughty blow for the guerdon of Rena Percival's love.

The servant whom Lord Balfour met in the hall directed him at once to Miss Percival, who was arranging some flowers in the west drawing-room.

At the unexpected sound of a man's footstep on the threshold, she glanced up and colored deeply as she recognized the Marquis of Balfour.

"I will call Lady Glenhampton directly," she said, dropping a bunch of wax-white orange blossoms as she returned his greeting. "I believe she is in the conservatory."

"But I did not come to see Lady Glenhampton," said Lord Balfour, composedly.

"Lady Blanche is playing croquet—she——"

"I know it—I saw her as I came in," answered Lord Balfour. "It is you that I called to see this morning, Miss Percival. Will you allow me to bring you a chair?"

Rena perceived but too plainly that there was no outlet of escape for her this time. She sat down in the light chair Lord Balfour placed for her with a sort of resigned desperation, and began nervously to twist the stem of a half-blown rosebud between her fingers.

"You see I am determined not to be evaded any longer, Miss Pervival," said the young man, calmly; "or is it all my own imagination, that you have systematically avoided me of late?"

"It is not your imagination," said Rena in a low tone.

"Then may I ask if my presence is so disagreeable to you?"

"It is not that."

"Do you really wish to escape my companionship?" he asked, looking as intently at her as if her fair face were an enigma which he was determined to read.

"Yes."

The answer came in a low tone, but it was firmly spoken.

"Yet you assert that it is from no personal dislike or antipathy. Miss Percival, I cannot understand you."

Rena was silent, but the carmine blood still glowed beneath her transparent skin, and he could see that the rose-

bud in her hand trembled as if a south wind had stirred its creamy petals.

"The truth is," he said, after a moment's silence, "I am resolved to cut this Gordian knot of perplexity. It is a matter of vital moment to me. Rena, will you think me presumptuous if I tell you how necessary you have become to the happiness of myself?—if I ask you to give that life its crowning grace and charm by becoming my wife?"

The carmine went and came on Rena's cheek, and her eyes glowed with a troubled light.

"Oh, Lord Balfour!" she said, in broken accents, as he paused, evidently awaiting her reply, "I have not deserved this honor at your hands."

"Dear Rena, you deserve a woman's noblest and highest place!" he answered, his voice thrilling with the earnestness of his soul. "I know not how or where I have grown to love you so deeply and passionately, but of this I am quite certain—the strongest instincts of my whole nature have gone out toward you. You will be my wife, Rena?"

"No, Lord Balfour."

He looked at her in sort of shocked surprise. Evidently this answer was the one he had least expected.

"Rena, you do not mean it. You are speaking now from some momentary pique, some impulse which is leading you falsely. I will accept no such answer. My beautiful wild rose, my queen, you *will* give yourself to me!"

"Never!"

There was no mistaking the emphasis of her tones this time, and to give it additional weight she lifted her eyes and fixed them full upon his face.

"Have I then allowed myself to be so misled?" he exclaimed, involuntarily clenching his right hand until the nails cut into the palm like so many points of steel. "Well, so let it be. Conceit and mad folly will, sooner or later, find their own level, and I have found mine."

"I cannot allow you to judge yourself thus harshly, Lord Balfour," said Rena, rousing herself into animation.

"Upon what other ground can I account for the strange delusion under which I have labored?" he asked, bitterly. "How, otherwise, could I have been insane enough to fancy that you loved me?"

"It was no fancy," Rena answered, her eyes fixed on the flower she held.

His face grew strangely bright.

"Rena, my heart's darling, you *do* love me, then?"

"Yes," she replied, in strange, hard accents which contrasted singularly with the thrilling tenderness of his; "but I never can marry you."

"Why not?"

"I had rather you would not press me for reasons, Lord Balfour."

"But, Rena, after what you have already confided to me it becomes my right to question you further. You love me, yet you will not marry me. What strange riddle is this?"

"It is *because* I love you that I will not marry you?" she cried, vehemently. "Oh, Lord Balfour, do you think it has cost me nothing to decide upon this? Do you suppose I am sacrificing my life and my life's happiness upon the altar of a mere idle whim?"

He looked at her earnestly.

"Your lauguage grows more and more inexplicable to me," he said.

"You are almost tempted to think me mad!" she cried, springing to her feet and throwing the curls back from her forehead with a short laugh. "But I am not mad, Lord Balfour—any jury of physicians could tell you that, unless people go mad with the dull, aching pain at their hearts."

He arose, and advancing toward her, took both her hands in his.

"Rena, you *shall* tell me why you will not become my wife!"

"Because you are the Marquis of Balfour, descended from a long line of unsullied ancestry, and I am only poor little Rena Percival, with scarcely the heritage of a name. Do you think I will drag you down with me?"

"But, Rena, my jewel, my priceless pearl among women," he murmured, tenderly, "I love you, and love knows no outward ranks nor distinctions."

"And because you are generous enough to forget the wide gulf of caste that separates us, do not think I can be so base as to let you throw yourself away on me? No, Lord Balfour, I am not ashamed to own that I love you as truly as ever will the high-born woman who is one day destined to be the Marchioness of Balfour, but I never shall be to you any more than I am now."

He gazed into her cheery, sparkling eyes with new admir-

ation—it seemed as if he were learning more and more of the hidden beauty of her soul.

"No woman but yourself, Rena Percival," he said, "shall ever be the Marchioness of Balfour. You have owned that you love me—what remains for you but to become my wife?"

"The poor glow-worm loves the star—the feeble torch may love the glory of the midday sun, but there the parallel ceases," she answered, with a melancholy smile. "I did not think ever to have spoken to mortal ears the words that have this day passed my lips, but once spoken they must be forgotten forever. Let me pass, Lord Balfour; our interview is over!"

"Rena!" he said, although chivalrously obedient to the words of her behest, he had abandoned his clasp of her ice-cold hand, "could you leave me thus?"

"One day you will thank me for it," she answered, pausing at the sound of his voice, although her touch was already on the handle of the door.

"Hear me but an instant longer," he pleaded, in accents to which she could not refuse to listen. "Let us forget the pitiful distinctions of birth to which you have alluded, let us remember only that our two hearts were created to thrill responsive, each to the other's throbs! Rena, my love, my darling, to be your husband will be a greater honor in my eyes than if you were a crowned queen or the daughter of a line of emperors! My mother is prepared to welcome you as a dear and cherished child of her own—my own life will be desolate and drear without you! Once more, Rena, I beg you to seal my fate, and tell me that you will be mine!"

"I cannot be your wife!" she uttered, in a low trembling voice.

"Is this decision entirely irrevocable?"

"It is!"

And while he stood there, in the fixed intensity of despair, she vanished from his sight.

CHAPTER XXIV.

LADY BLANCHE'S SUITORS.

Through one of the many strange coincidences in this world, which rival the most glowing scenes of romance, at the same time that the Marquis of Balfour was vainly urging his suit to Rena Percival, a second affair of the heart was transpiring among the rhododendrons at the eastern front of Glenhampton Castle, where a rustic temple, its colonnades overgrown with woodbine and ivy, stood within the musical sound of a fountain, where a group of cupids seemed to disport themselves around the edge of a huge marble shell, dripping with limpid water. It was the very place for love to breathe its numbers, and so, perhaps, Lord Vere Temple thought, when the guests all scattered in different directions at the breaking up of the croquet party, and he led Lady Blanche Arden to this particular spot.

"You are weary, Blanche," he said, as she threw herself down on the rustic seat of twisted cedar boughs, which corresponded so perfectly with the sylvan beauty of the whole place.

"No, indeed, I am not," she answered, gayly. "I could play croquet all day."

"But you look flushed."

"That is because the morning is so warm."

She laughed, and fanned herself with the brim of her straw croquet hat, and looked so bewitchingly pretty and blossom-like that Lord Vere Temple spoke out at once the words that had been trembling on his lips for so long.

"Blanche," he exclaimed passionately, "I love you! There now! I have startled you, my little shy fawn; but you must not look so enchantingly beautiful if you don't want a man to lose his senses in your presence. Dear Blanche," he added, "is there anything terrible in the fact that I love you?"

She blushed vividly, but she did not seem by any means averse to the idea which had been so unceremoniously presented to her mind. Perhaps he read the secret of her heart in her eyes, for he went on emboldened:

"I may as well speak it out, dear little Blanche, for it has

filled my whole heart and soul for days and weeks past—the hope that you may one day become my wife. I know I am not half so good, and pure, and innocent as you are, dearest, but I love you, and I will treasure you in my heart of hearts as fondly as if you were a queen. Tell me, dear one, will you be my wife?"

"If I am worthy of you, Vere, yes."

And as Lord Vere Temple pressed the kiss that sealed their betrothal upon her lips he felt, as many another young lover has felt at such a time as this—that Heaven had given him a greater treasure by far than he had deserved.

His infatuation for Miss Percival had been a sort of brief madness—he had almost forgotten it now, and was quite ready to wonder at himself as much as any disinterested observer could wonder at him. Little Lady Blanche was safe upon the throne of her conquest—no power could shake the allegiance of her lover now.

"And I may tell mamma?" she asked, looking with pleading happiness into the face of her tall wooer.

"Tell mamma, and tell everybody else, my darling. I don't care who knows it! I shall write to the earl this very evening to ask leave to bear away his little treasure; and, remember, we are to be married this fall!"

"So soon!" she said, with a half-startled look.

"So soon! Isn't it nearly three long mortal months off? I am not a Jacob, to serve seven years patiently. I must have you all to myself before we both grow old and wrinkled!"

And Lady Blanche laughed merrily at the idea of impending age and wrinkles.

The Countess of Glenhampton received the tidings with evident gratification.

"My dear Vere," she said, with the gentle graciousness which she could assume whenever she saw fit, and which was so becoming to her, "I shall receive you as a second son with real pleasure. I do not think my daughter could have chosen better; and it is so much better, in my opinion, for young people to settle early in life!"

So far the suit of Lord Vere Temple prospered brilliantly, and the Countess of Glenhampton so managed it that before sunset everyone in the castle was quite aware that Lord Vere Temple had proposed to Lady Blanche Arden and been accepted. She wanted it to be a universally understood thing

at once. Perhaps it was because she had still some lingering doubts concerning Rena Percival's fascinations, and the manner in which they might be employed.

"She will never dare to flirt with my daughter's betrothed husband," she thought.

But she did not know how essentially different her daughter's friend had grown to be of late, or her hate might have softened into pity, bitter and unrelenting as it was.

Lady Blanche was sitting with her mother in the little pink-and-gold reception room where Lady Glenhampton wrote her letters, kept her dainty workstand, and occasionally painted a little in water colors, so that her children had called it "mamma's work-room" when they were little. It was the first opportunity Blanche had found to be alone with her mother since the momentous event of the morning.

At such a time as this it was natural enough that mother and daughter should have much to say to each other, and Blanche had scarcely begun the details of her happy confidences when a footman appeared in the open doorway.

"Mr. Poynings' compliments, my lady, and would be obliged to you if you would see him for a few moments."

"Not now, mamma," said Blanche, coaxingly. "I haven't fairly seen you all day, and I must have you now for a little while. Mr. Poynings can wait!"

"As if it were likely that I should spare you just now, child," said Lady Glenhampton, letting her hand fall caressingly upon her daughter's hair. "Tell Mr. Poynings," she added, speaking to the servant, "that it is not convenient for me to see him at present; some other time will do."

The man departed, and Blanche nestled up to her mother's side once more in undisturbed security. But it seemed scarcely an instant since the servant's departure when the sound of advancing footsteps broke in upon the thread of the young girl's innocent talk, and Mr. Poynings himself entered.

Lady Glenhampton rose in stately surprise.

"I thought I had given orders to be denied to visitors!" she said, with a ring of hauteur in her tone. "Harper!" for the footman's troubled face appeared in the rear of this persistent guest, "did you understand what I said to you?"

"Pray do not blame the man," said Mr. Poynings, with elaborate politeness. "He gave your ladyship's message of denial quite correctly."

"Then to what may I attribute the unexpected,"—she hesitated the merest fraction of a second, and then went on —"pleasure of your society at this moment?"

"My business with your ladyship is important," said Mr. Poynings, "and"—he glanced about imperceptibly in the direction of Lady Blanche Arden—"and it is of a private nature."

"It must be important, to warrant your conduct, Mr. Poynings!" said Lady Glenhampton, haughtily.

Lady Blanche, to whom the family lawyer had bowed low, rose to withdraw.

"I will come in again, mamma, when you are at leisure," said she. "Good evening, Mr. Poynings!"

As the soft rustling sound of her white dress died away in the corridors Lady Glenhampton rang the bell.

"Lights," she said, briefly, to Harper, who responded to the summons, and presently the room flashed with brilliance. Mr. Poynings had stood quite silent, leaning against the edge of the mantel the while.

"And now," said Lady Glenhampton, when they were once more left to themselves, "will you be good enough to inform me what the business can be which renders you so indifferent to all etiquette or conventionality?"

Lady Glenhampton was herself irritated beyond her usual wont, or she could not have failed to observe that there was something dangerous about the whole aspect and demeanor of the man who stood facing her. His face, never very full of color, was now almost of a gray pallor, and a smoldering light seemed to glow beneath his contracted brows, while the obliquity of vision which grew more noticeable under the influence of any strong emotion, was unusually prominent at this moment.

"I have heard news, Lady Glenhampton," he said, speaking smoothly. "I suppose we have all heard it, however true or false it may prove to be. It is a penalty paid invariably by the great—that they should have their affairs mercilessly discussed by those who stand in a less exalted position."

Something in his tone of voice made the countess look suddenly up and glance at him with more intentness than she had hitherto thought it worth while to employ. He was faultlessly dressed, and he looked very composed and gentlemanly, standing there in an attitude that was appar-

ently quite unstudied; but Lady Glenhampton perceived now that he was in no ordinary mood, and her pulse thrilled with an uncomfortably quick movement.

"To what news do you allude, Mr. Poynings?" she asked, speaking more courteously than she had done before.

"To what is doubtless a perfectly unfounded story—the rumor that Lady Blanche, your daughter, is engaged to Lord Vere Temple."

"You are mistaken in supposing it unfounded," said the countess, calmly. "Lady Blanche *is* engaged to Lord Vere Temple."

"With your consent?" asked Mr. Poynings, the grayish whiteness overspreading his face, as if some invisible painter's brush had touched it.

"With my full consent and approbation!"

Mr. Poynings advanced a step or two toward his interlocutor.

"Then, Lady Glenhampton, you have played me cruelly false!" he said.

"I! Played you false, Mr. Poynings! Will you tell me what you can possibly mean?"

Lady Glenhampton rose with a stately dignity that might have quelled and overborne any one less resolute than Theodore Poynings, but he recoiled not a step.

"Do you tell me, Lady Glenhampton, that you do not know that I have been steadily, and for all these years, aspiring to your daughter's hand."

"You?" she echoed.

"And why not I, Countess of Glenhampton? I am a gentleman, by breeding and education, if not by birth—I have means, and I have contrived to attain a position of which any lawyer in the three kingdoms might be proud——"

"Through my intercession and endeavor," coldly interposed the countess.

"I am willing to confess that it was, partly, through your ladyship's intercession and endeavor, for which I am not ungrateful. But, do you remember to what I owe your kind interest in my welfare?"

She sat quite silent, looking straight at him.

"I have endeavored to be your friend always," she said, putting her hand up to her throat, as if the slender band of

velvet, starred with diamonds, that she wore there, impeded her free breath, and loosening its clasp.

"Yet you desert me in the very point I have most at heart." he said, in a tone strangely insolent—"the winning of your daughter to be my wife!"

"Mr. Poynings, you must know that such a thing as that is totally impossible," said Lady Glenhampton, her color rising, and her voice quivering with repressed indignation. "My daughter is the Lady Blanche Arden."

"And I am nobody but plain Theodore Poynings. Your ladyship does not need to remind me of the fact," said Mr. Poynings. "Yet, all this to the contrary notwithstanding, I intend to marry your daughter, and I am here to-night to insist upon your countenance and support to my suit."

"But she is already engaged to Lord Vere Temple."

"The engagement must be broken off!"

He spoke in a tone so arrogant and full of insolent self-assertion that Lady Glenhampton, who up to this time had seemed under the influence of a spell which kept down her anger and contempt, could endure it no longer.

"I think," said she, haughtily, "that you forget to whom you are speaking, Mr. Poynings. I have made your fortune; I have constituted you a *protege* of my own; I have lifted you out of the obscurity of a mere attorney's clerk into the best society of the neighborhood; but I will not thus be insulted by you. Will you leave my presence, or shall I be obliged to call a servant?"

"I will not leave your presence," Mr. Poynings answered, with cool audacity; "nor would I advise you, always speaking in your own interest, to ring the bell upon which your hand now rests. Lady Glenhampton, you and I both know that there are matters better kept within as contracted a circle as possible. If you will reflect a moment you will perceive how unadvisable it is to allow your temper to get the better of your discretion."

The Countess of Glenhampton bit her lip until the blood started.

"Mr. Poynings," said she, "how much do you suppose I am going to bear from you? I advise you to beware; there are limits to all human endurance."

"It is quite useless to beat around the bush any longer," said Mr. Poynings, with folded arms and a smile that was nothing but a sneer. "We ought to understand each other

quite well by this time, Lady Glenhampton. I have on my part simply to say to you that I demand—yes demand, for you may as well comprehend my full meaning—that this engagement of Lady Blanche's to her aristocratic young admirer be broken off at once, and my own claims to her hand be fully recognized."

"But the earl?" shuddered Lady Glenhampton. "He could never be induced to give his consent."

"I am quite aware that your ladyship's influence over him is not what it was," said Mr. Poynings, still with the evil smile upon his face; "but you must do what you can, and I will risk the rest."

"The world—what will it say?" uttered Lady Glenhampton, as if she were thinking aloud, rather than addressing herself to a crafty lawyer.

"The world—the world!" contemptuously echoed Mr. Poynings. "You and I, my lady countess, know that same world well enough to comprehend that it is our mere tool, if it is handled rightly. I have no fears as far as the world is concerned!"

"Man! do you know what you are asking of me?" broke from Lady Glenhampton's pale lips, as she wrung her hands until the diamonds on her slender fingers seemed to emit shattered rainbows of quivering fire. "I have given to you money, help, influence—all that you have asked, without stint—but my beautiful, joyous-hearted child—a fiend incarnate could not ask me to give up her young happiness, and blight the life that has just begun. Ask what you please that is mine to give, but spare her."

The wild entreaty of the mother's voice might have melted a heart of stone. Poynings stood unmoved, however.

"You talk as if I were the wicked giant in a fairy tale," said he sullenly. "What is there so outrageous in the idea of my wanting a titled wife? I shall make a good husband to the girl. Why, I would be willing to wager a good round sum that I love her quite as well as that young fop, Vere Temple, although it never was my way to go into ecstasies about anything!"

"Stop!" said Lady Glenhampton, in a choked, breathless tone, as she lifted her forefinger with a warning gesture, "you are going too far, Mr. Poynings. I have endured much from you, but I shall not endure this."

"But I say you shall!" said Mr. Poynings, a sudden flash of rage beginning to coruscate from beneath his eyelashes. "I have taken a fancy to marry Lady Blanche Arden—her soft, pretty face pleases my eye, and her rank and title please the common-sense part of me—and you shall give her to me, or——" and he hissed out the rest of the sentence in slow syllables, watching greedily for their effect. "I throw away the scabbard, and there shall be war to the knife between us—yes, Countess of Glenhampton, war to the knife!"

She sank back in the chair from which she had momentarily risen, pale and shuddering.

"You will give her to me?" demanded Poynings, after a moment or two of silence, during which he never lifted his glittering eyes from her face.

"I will not!"

At this instant Blanche ran into the room, her face radiant with innocent gayety.

'Mamma," she cried, "I want—but oh, mamma what is the matter? Are you ill?"

"No, not ill!" gasped Lady Glenhampton, the smile for which she strove burning into a mere galvanic contortion of the lips. "Go away, Blanche; leave me for a little while!"

"Pray do not leave us on my account, Lady Blanche," said Mr. Poynings, smoothly. "Perhaps you can decide this matter which seems too difficult for your mother to settle!"

Lady Glenhampton sprang up, with blazing eyes and a face totally blanched of every vestige of color.

"How dare you speak so to this innocent girl?" she cried, her voice sounding strangely stifled and shrill. "How dare you thus defy me?"

"It is you who are defying me!" he retorted, cowed somewhat by her manner, yet insolent still. "Lady Glenhampton, you know enough of my character to understand what my revenge can be, if I am driven to it. And I swear to you that I will be revenged."

Lady Blanche stood pale and silent, looking from one to the other of the speakers, with eyes dilated and a wondering intentness of gaze.

"Mamma," she cried, grasping her mother's hand, "what

does he mean? Why do you look so frightened. Shall I call Vere?"

Lady Glenhampton mutely shook her head. Mr. Poynings laughed.

"I would advise you to be very careful how you summon a council of friends, Lady Blanche," he said, superciliously. "Family affairs are best kept quiet—eh, my Lady Glenhampton?"

"Leave me, if you please, sir," she said, summoning some remnant of her former dignity. "I cannot endure any longer conversation to-night."

He hesitated, but apparently judged it better to concede a little.

"Shall I wait on your ladyship to-morrow?" he asked, obsequiously.

"Yes."

She paused so long before she spoke the monosyllable that he had his lips open to speak again.

"At what hour?"

"I don't know, I don't care; only leave me," she answered, in a sort of helpless despair.

"Shall we say five o'clock?" he persisted.

"Yes."

He doubted even then whether she understood the meaning of his question, but there was something in her manner that warned him not to press matters too far, and with a low bow to Lady Blanche, and a few words of adieu to the countess, who did not seem to hear him, he departed. Blanche went up to her mother the moment the spell of his odious presence was withdrawn and put her arms lovingly about her.

"Mamma, what does it all mean?" she asked. "What makes him speak to you so impertinently? Why don't you have him turned out of the house?"

Lady Glenhampton tried to smile.

"It is only his presuming way, my love," she said. "Do not let us talk any more about it just now. I suppose something must be done to check it, but—but there is time enough. What was it you were going to ask me?"

"I brought you a letter, mamma—the postman sent a special messenger with it just now; he says it was somehow overlooked in the mails, and must have been detained over a week on the way. He hopes it isn't of much importance,

and is terribly cast down and apologetic about it. I suppose I ought to have scolded him, but I only told him to be sure it never occurred again."

Lady Glenhampton took the letter mechanically from her daughter's hand and broke the seal, glancing over its contents in a dreamy, absent way, which instantly changed to breathless surprise and dismay.

"What is it, mamma?" cried Blanche, who was watching her mother's face. "Tell me, mamma, is papa ill?"

"No," Lady Glenhampton wailed; "it is from Ernest, my only boy—the one in whom all my hopes were bound up—to tell me that he is married."

CHAPTER XXV.

CAPTAIN EVELYN'S FATE.

Our story returns once more to Alice Percival, to whom the great mystery of every woman's existence was being gradually unfolded.

"My dear," said the Reverend Mr. Eskett to his wife, one afternoon, as she sat sewing in the porch—"my dear——"

"Well?"

Mrs. Eskett looked up briskly as she bit off the end of her thread.

"Theresa, don't you think Captain Evelyn admires our little governess very much?"

"Of course he does," said Mrs. Eskett, laughing; "it would not require any very marvelous amount of perception to see that. All I can say, is that I admire his taste; she is the prettiest little creature I ever saw."

"Do you think there is any danger of his falling in love with her?" asked Mr. Eskett, seriously.

"My dear Ralph! as if he were not in love already! it's past praying for."

"Then," said the rector, beginning to walk up and down the porch uneasily, "he must go away from here at once."

"What for?" questioned Mrs. Eskett, in surprise.

"Don't you see yourself, Theresa? Lady Glenhampton's son can't marry our governess."

"But why not, I should like to know, if he loves her, and she returns his feeling?"

"My dear, the idea is simply preposterous. She is of obscure origin, without a penny of fortune, and totally unaccustomed to the ways of the great world."

"But she is beautiful as an angel and good as a saint!" cried Mrs. Eskett, enthusiastically. "Ralph, Ralph! I did not think you could be so worldly!"

"It is not I that am worldly, my love; if he were a son of my own I could wish no better or sweeter wife for him than this Miss Percival," answered the rector of Tregarvan. "But I know enough of the Countess of Glenhampton's ambitious and scheming nature to be quite certain that she would never sanction such an affair as this."

"But Ernest Evelyn is his own master."

"Literally speaking, I suppose he is; but I have always heard he has not a penny beyond his pay in the —— Dragoons, and what the generosity of the Earl of Glenhampton allows him. To marry this girl would be pecuniary ruin, to say nothing of the risk he would run of mortally offending both his mother and his step-father."

"I am tired of hearing love and marriage discussed as if they were a mere matter of bargain and sale!" cried Mrs. Eskett, with crimsoned cheeks and sparkling eyes. "Are people to be allowed no independence of action? You, Ralph, who are a minister of the gospel, should be the last person to lend your countenance to a system which grinds down all the better and holier instincts of our nature."

"My dear," said patient Mr. Eskett, "I have asserted once that I am not now expressing my own opinions, but merely acting as the guardian of other's interests. While Captain Evelyn is a guest at Tregarvan Rectory, I am, to a certain extent, morally responsible for him to the countess, his mother."

"And what course do you intend to pursue, Ralph?" she asked.

"Why, I suppose I ought to tell Ernest frankly that he had better pack up his traps and take himself off before he gets any deeper into the slough of despond that these crazy young people call 'love!' "

"Will he take it pleasantly?"

"He ought to take it exactly in the spirit in which it is meant. If he doesn't I cannot help it!" answered the rector, with a quiet decision in his tone, which Mrs. Eskett always respected, although it seldom appeared. "I suppose I had better go to him at once. Do you know where he is?"

"He has taken Alice out for a drive to Cherwyllyn's Point. Poor young things—let them have one day more of happiness. Don't speak to him until to-morrow morning."

"It is my duty to speak at once, Theresa," said the good rector, gravely. "And the children?"

"They are off in the woods gathering berries with old Margery. I told them they might have a holiday for once."

Mrs. Eskett's eyes fell, and her lips broke into a mischievous yet self-condemning smile as her husband looked steadily at her. But the expected lecture for "aiding and

abetting" the growth of love between Captain Evelyn and Alice Percival did not come. All he said was:

"It is high time he left Tregarvan Rectory."

The rector would have thought so in good earnest, could he have made an invisible third in the jolting little vehicle which was at that moment rolling cozily along a steep mountain road which led in a series of circuitous windings toward the grand cliff called "Cherwyllyn Point," and heard the words Captain Ernest Evelyn was even then speaking to his beautiful companion.

"Alice, you must surely have seen it long ago," he exclaimed, vehemently. "I am not a man of snow or marble, to conceal my feelings."

"I suspected it—once in a long time," she answered, shyly, with her eyes fixed intently on the green summer landscape gliding slowly past them.

"And you have not answered me yet. My precious one, don't keep me in suspense. Tell me frankly, for it is not in your nature to be anything but frank, do you return my love?"

Oh, Captain Evelyn! Captain Evelyn! is this the boasted constancy of a man's heart? Scarcely a month has elapsed since you poured out your vows on the shrine of the relentless Rena. It is well for the girls of the nineteenth century that they cannot read all the revelations of their lovers' past! Yet, after all, a heart caught in the rebound is oftentimes a heart well worth having.

And Alice, unused to the coquettish wiles common to her sex upon similar occasions, looked into his face with limpid, violet eyes, and answered:

"How can I help it, Ernest, when you are so good, so noble, so worthy of all a woman's love?"

He pressed her hand tenderly in his; it was surprising how easy a thing it was to drive with one hand, particularly when the gray pony knew the way by heart, and trotted along in a sage, sober sort of way, as if he were quite willing to take the entire responsibility of the whole route upon his own shoulders, and leave the young people behind him to enjoy themselves after their own fashion.

"Well," said Mrs. Eskett, when Miss Percival came in that evening, "have you had a pleasant ride, my love?"

"*Very* pleasant," Alice answered.

And Mrs. Eskett, in the kindness of her heart, could have

cried to think how soon her bright dream was to be rudely broken in upon.

Meanwhile the rector had joined Captain Evelyn as he smoked his cigar in the yew trees in the garden.

"My dear fellow," said he, somewhat abruptly, "do you know where you are going?"

"Well—yes," said Ernest, reflectively. "I went to Cherwyllyn Point to-day—to-morrow I shall drive over to Cresslyn. There's an old church there that the antiquarians tell me is exceedingly well worth seeing."

"Alone!"

"Am I the sort of 'melancholy Jaques' that prefers solitude and his own socicty? Of course not, sir. Miss Percival has kindly consented to accompany me."

"My boy," said the rector, gravely, "you are not going to Cresslyn Church, but straight to your own discomfiture and ruin!"

"I don't understand you, sir."

"Yes you do, Ernest. This sort of thing has got to come to an end at once. She is sweet and womanly, and gentle as any girl living—but you know what your mother's ideas upon the subject are, my poor fellow!"

The last three words were wrung from him by the expression on Ernest Evelyn's face.

"My mother!" repeated the young man, impatiently. The rector lifted a warning finger, and he added: "My mother is my mother, I know—but she does not own me soul and body. There are some things which a man must decide for himself."

"But not without counsel and due deliberation," said the rector, gravely. "Ernest, I know enough of your peculiar circumstances to be convinced that you are at this moment putting yourself into great peril, nor would I willingly be blamed for my share, however unconscious, of the business. You must go away from here at once."

"So you are going to turn me out of doors, Mr. Eskett?" said Captain Ernest, relighting the cigar which he had allowed to go out in the absorbing interest of the discussion.

"I don't want to seem inhospitable, Ernest, but what can I do?"

"You are giving me credit for self-control and resolution."

"My dear boy," said the rector, with a whimsical uplift-

ing of the brows, "I give you credit for all that is good and noble, but I have been in love myself, and I know just what resolution and self-control are worth at such a time as this?"

"But I came down to Tregarvan Rectory to spend the summer. You will at least give me the same notice to leave that you would accord to your groom or gardener—a month!"

"Not I!" said the rector, determinedly. "A month! Why you would be a married man at the end of that time!"

"You are taking a good deal for granted, sir."

"Of course I am! A month, indeed!"

"A week, then. Come, Mr. Eskett, you wouldn't turn a visitor out of your house on less than a week's notice?"

"You'll see whether I shall or not!" the rector answered, composedly.

"But I have promised to take Miss Percival to Cresslyn to-morrow!"

"I can't be responsible, that I know of, for all your rash promises, young man!" said the relentless Mr. Eskett.

"I can't forfeit my word, and I won't!" said Captain Evelyn, puffing energetically away at his cigar. "If this is the savage way in which you're going to treat me, I'll hire Rhyil Penzance, and settle down here for the summer. You can't very well prevent that!"

Rhyil Penzance was a romantic little shooting lodge some mile-and-a-half from the rectory of Tregarvan, which happened to be "to let" at that time, and the good rector's apprehensions were roused at once. He knew enough of the willfulness of Captain Evelyn's character to be certain that he was quite capable of carrying his threat into immediate execution if he were opposed too far.

"Day after to-morrow, then," said he, hesitatingly; "will that suit you?"

"I suppose so," grumbled Ernest. "Pretty hospitality this!"

"It's your own fault," said the rector, laughing. "Come, Evelyn—own up that it is."

"I'll own up to nothing," said Captain Evelyn, unable to repress a smile. "I mean to follow the example of fashionable tourists and write a book about Wales, and I'll be especially careful to state that all the rectors in Wales are in the

habit of turning guests out of their houses on two days' notice, after inveigling them down with the politest of promises."

"I don't care how many books you write," said the rector, "as long as you get safely away from Tregarvan."

And he went into the house quite relieved to think that the uncomfortable conversation was over, and inwardly delighted that Captain Evelyn had made "so little fuss about it!"

"I really don't think he cares so very much about her, after all," thought Mr. Eskett.

CHAPTER XXVI.

MARRIED.

Alice Percival looked very lovely in her white dress and blue-ribboned hat, as they drove along the wild and secluded road leading to Cresslyn Church, the next day. Ernest thought she had never been half so beautiful, and the determination to call her his own waxed stronger in his heart with every moment.

"What makes you so silent, Ernest?" she ventured to ask, after one or two wistful glances at his absorbed face, when they had left Tregarvan Rectory behind them by a mile or two.

"I was thinking how best to tell you what I have to impart this morning," he said, his grave lips softening into a smile.

She grew a little pale.

"Is it bad news, Ernest?"

"I don't regard it in that light, myself," he answered.

"Then I am not afraid to hear it."

"Shall I speak on?" he asked, and she replied:

"Yes."

"Well, then, it is this, Alice—we must be married this morning!"

"Ernest!"

"I knew you would be surprised, my little one, but since you have promised to give yourself to me, what difference can it be whether it is a few days sooner or later. You are willing to trust me, Alice?"

"Yes—oh yes, Ernest, but—it is so sudden! I have not written to Rena—I have not told Mrs. Eskett, who has been so very, very kind to me "

"All that can be done afterward, my dearest; but circumstances have occurred which renders my stay at Tregarvan exceedingly uncertain, and I must make sure of my precious prize at once. Listen, my darling. You, who have lived in seclusion all your days, can form no idea of the plots, and plans, and schemes which form part of the real world. I am simple Ernest Evelyn, a captain in the —th Dragoons, with nothing but my pay to live on, and my mother, who is

one of the most ambitious women in England, is determined that I shall secure wealth and ease by marrying some heiress or other."

Alice had grown pale.

"But, Ernest, not if you did not love her?"

"Love!" he echoed, with a bitter laugh. "My Alice, love enters but little into the calculations of the world. No—if I go back to Glenhampton, I shall be drawn into the vortex which it is impossible to resist. It rests with you, my guardian angel, to save me from a life which I shudder to contemplate! Will you turn from my pleading?"

She involuntarily nestled nearer to him.

"How can I save you, Ernest?"

"By becoming my wife at once. Alice, you will consent? Once indissolubly bound to each other, no earthly power can avail to sever our united futures; we shall have nothing to fear."

She looked into his face, and placed her hand trustingly in his.

"It shall be as you wish, dear Ernest."

"My own darling, you can never know from what you have saved me," he murmured, almost inaudibly.

And they were married under the hoary, echoing arches of Cresslyn Church by a sleepy-looking young curate who, probably, supposed them to be one of the many runaway English couples who sought the outskirts of the sister kingdoms, to consummate their unions, sometimes from sheer love of the romance of the thing sometimes from deeper and more substantial motives.

The noonday sunshine touched the beautiful young bride's hair with lustrous gleams of gold, as she came out of the church porch, leaning on the arm of her newly made husband, and his heart thrilled high with exultant pride and love.

"My Alice," he whispered, bowing his head to her, "you do not regret the step you have taken?"

"Regret it!"

She echoed the words with such soft, incredulous tenderness that it gave a new happiness to this moment of bliss.

"And Heaven helping me, you never shall!" he added.

Ernest Evelyn had been a trifler all his life, but his character was developing now, in the elevating influence of this new, genuine love, as a flower grows in the showers

and sunshine of a spring day. Alice Percival was the sweet, ennobling spirit that drew him nearer to his own better self.

As the afternoon drew toward sunset, and the sunset softened into early twilight, and the sight-seers did not return, Mrs. Eskett began to grow a little uneasy.

"Surely they ought to be at home by this time," she said, for the twentieth time at least. "I do hope nothing has happened."

"Why, what should have happened, my dear?" said the rector. "Don't fret—don't fret, they'll be home in time."

"But it is eight o'clock."

"When it is nine I'll begin to worry too," laughed the rector. "Let the poor fellow enjoy this one day—as you said yesterday—it is his last."

"And I am heartily glad of it," said Mrs. Eskett, who in spite of the interest she felt in this apparently blighted love affair was very nearly out of temper. "What is it that you want, my good man?" for at that moment a gray-haired old man stood in the door-way, making his best bow over and over again with unceasing persistency, and trying to extract from the cover of his hat something which had apparently got wedged in there.

"Please, ma'am, I be come all the way from Cresslyn to see Muster Eskett, him as is the rector here. The young gentleman gived me a letter as was to be guv in his own hands?"

"I am Mr. Eskett," said the rector taking the letter which the stranger had brought.

Mrs. Eskett summoned the man of all work to take the messenger into the kitchen and give him a glass of home-brewed ale after his walk, and then went back to her husband's study.

"Ralph, what is the matter? Any news from——"

"Yes," said the rector, quietly folding the letter, and placing it once more in the greasy envelope. "They are married."

"Married!" echoed Mrs. Eskett, her breath fairly taken away by the suddenness of the tidings. "What! Captain Evelyn and Alice?"

"Yes—at Cresslyn Church this morning," said Mr. Eskett, who, although he was in the habit of getting sorely perplexed and befogged about the trivial occurrences of life,

never lost his presence of mind in great emergencies. "They will be back here to claim our hospitality, he writes, in three days. Where did I put my pen, my dear?"

"What are you going to do?" asked Mrs. Eskett.

"I am going to telegraph at once to the Earl of Glenhampton."

CHAPTER XXVII.

ELISON POLWHEAL'S DEATH-BED.

For the last few years Adelbert, Earl of Glenhampton, had led a wandering and uncertain life, spending but little of his time in his own native land. The great grief of his youth seemed to grow heavier and more poignant as the years crept on, instead of yielding to the influence of the great enchanter Time—and there were periods when his friends almost feared for the preservation of his reason—periods of sharp, spasmodic grief, when the past seemed to become once more present, and the buried ghosts of the departed anguish rose up from their sepulcher, and seemed to confront him face to face.

He had been spending some months in Paris, where the air seemed to agree with his broken health, and the society of a few choice friends served to keep him from too much companionship with his own meditations, and it was there that Mr. Eskett's telegram reached him.

It was short and succinct:

"Come to me at once if you are alive and capable of traveling. For Heaven's sake, do not delay! R. ESKETT,
"Tregarvan Rectory, Cardigonshire, Wales."

Lord Glenhampton read the dispatch two or three times over, as men will read such things, as if a second or third perusal could extract a hidden meaning unpreceived in the first glance.

"I wonder what has happened?" he thought. "It cannot possibly be that old Elison——, but, nonsense! she must be dead and buried long ago! Nevertheless I will go—if Eskett is ill or in any trouble, I should be the man of all others to be by his side!"

And so Lord Glenhampton's valet was surprised by orders to pack a portmanteau at once for the evening train.

"I am going to England," was all the explanation he vouchsafed to give.

The night in which they crossed the channel was dark and tempestuous, and as Lord Glenhampton stood on deck, wrapped in his dark coat-cloak his thoughts traveled afar off into the certainties of the past, and the vague possibilities of the future.

"I have felt strangely drawn toward England of late," he pondered to himself. "Were I a more stanch believer in signs and omens, I should believe it to be the mysterious beckoning of some unknown hand; but I believe I have passed the period of superstition. Had anything occurred to render my presence at Glenhampton necessary, Edith would have sent for me. I almost wish Eskett had been a little more circumstantial in his telegram."

Even in a railway-girded land delays are sometimes inevitable, and it was not until the fifth day after the rector of Tregarvan had sent his telegraphic message that the Earl of Glenhampton descended from the car which had brought him from the railway station at the honeysuckle-canopied wicket-gate of the garden in which stood the rectory.

Through the open study window the earl could catch a glimpse of his friend's bald head, bending over his papers as absorbedly as if there were no outside world of bloom and light and fragrance.

The click of the garden gate latch roused the rector from his studious trance. He sprang up, and in another moment had the earl by both hands in a delighted grasp, and led him into the quiet little rectory parlor.

"You telegraphed to me?" said Lord Glenhampton, seating himself.

"Yes—I—I telegraphed to you!" said the rector, rubbing his nose in evident embarrassment. "I had something to tell you—something I thought, at the time, you could break to Lady Glenhampton better than any one else. But I was, perhaps, a little premature—it seems he has written to her."

"He! Whom do you mean!" demanded the puzzled earl.

"Why, Ernest—Ernest Evelyn. He is married."

"Indeed! and to whom?" asked the earl, not by any means with the astonishment that Mr. Eskett had expected to see.

The rector was just opening his lips to reply, when the door opened and a slender figure glided in, leading little Phebe by the hand—the figure of the bride of less than a week, her bright hair hanging round her face in shining gold-brown tresses, her violet-blue eyes sparkling with innocent happiness, and her cheeks glowing like the roses that swung athwart the casement at every breeze.

For an instant Lord Glenhampton sat pale and rigid as if he had been turned into a statue of ice, and then he rose up,

holding to the arm of the chair for support, and gasping for breath.

"Child, who are you?" he exclaimed, his gaze fixed upon her as if she had been an apparition from another world.

Alice stood mute and startled. The rector hurried to his friend's side.

"Glenhampton, what is it?" he asked, eagerly. "Are you ill?"

"It is Allegra, my wife!" broke in faltering accents from the earl's pale lips—"my dead wife! my lost treasure! smiling up into my face as she smiled twenty years ago! Eskett! Eskett! don't you see her very face?"

"You forget, old friend, that I never saw the first Lady Glenhampton," said the rector of Tregarvan, soothingly.

"Shall I go away, Mr. Eskett," asked Alice, half-terrified; and at the sound of her voice a shudder thrilled through Lord Glenhampton's whole frame.

"Tell me, I say, who you are?" he exclaimed, looking at her as if he expected that the next moment she would vanish into thin air.

"I am Alice," she answered, softly.

"Alice? Alice who?"

"Alice Evelyn," she made reply, with a blushing hesitation to speak her new name.

"No!" he cried, vehemently; "you are *not* Alice Evelyn —you are little Allegra, who died eighteen years ago, the little Allegra who had her mother's eyes and her mother's voice."

"My dear friend," interposed the startled rector, "I do not think you know what you are saying. Travel and loss of sleep have worn you out. Let me take you to your room, where you can rest a little."

But the Earl of Glenhampton disregarded his imploring appeal.

"Can a man refuse to believe the evidences of his own senses?" he asked, scornfully impatient of contradiction.

"But, Glenhampton, if she be, as you say, and as we all know, dead——"

"She is not dead!" impatiently interrupted the earl, who seemed to be under the influence of some overweening conviction which had taken possession of him, soul, brain, and heart. "Do I not tell you that she stands here, living and breathing, before me?"

"She lies buried at Glenhampton," soothingly interposed the rector.

At this juncture the opposite door was opened, and the servant looked apprehensively in.

"I beg your parding for a interruptin' of you, Mr. Eskett, but Hester Jones has just come down from that old woman Polwheal's; and, please sir, they don't think as she can last much longer. It's her own belief as she's goin' out with the tide, sir, at sunset; and Hester thinks she hadn't ought to be left to die withouten so much as a prayer said over her."

"Is it Elison Polwheal?" asked Lord Glenhampton, turning to the rector. Mr. Eskett nodded assent.

"The finger of Providence is in this thing," said the earl in a low, tremulous voice. "We will both go to Elison Polwheal. If there is a key to this mystery she possesses it, and she alone. Allegra, my little Allegra, you will come with us?"

He took her hand as he spoke and drew her toward him. The tenderly spoken name sounded strangely sweet in her ears, bewildered though they were by the strange occurrences of the moment.

"Yes," she answered, although her heart beat a pulse or two more rapidly than usual, and she could not help wishing that Ernest had returned from his trout-fishing expedition among the hills, for her to lean upon his counsel and advice. "I will go with you, sir."

"Is it far?" Lord Glenhampton asked of the rector.

"Several miles, but the little wagon is at the door. I was going to the village this afternoon."

The cottage, or rather hut, where old Elison Polwheal lay dying was a rude structure of mud and stone, with a steep thatched roof and an immense stone chimney, into which the swallows darted ever and anon, seeming to lose themselves in its yawning depths.

Hester Jones, that old woman's granddaughter, who had come across the fields by a short cut, had reached the cottage before them, and now stood courtesying in the doorway.

"She's a bit better, gentlemen," she said, as she made way for them to enter, "but it's the death-stroke is on her. Please to sit down, gentlemen, and Mrs. Evelyn; it's a mor-

tal poor place for the likes of you, but it's clean as soap and sand can make it."

Upon a low wooden bedstead, opposite the door, and directly beneath a slit-like window, lay a very aged woman, propped up by pillows, and with her yellow hands crossed on the outside of the coverlid. Her face was as sunken and rigid as that of a corpse, and the nose and chin nearly met. The light blue eyes, plainly visible through the half-closed lids, shone with a strange, glassy luster, and the disheveled gray hair lay loose over the pillow, like the wild tresses of a pictured Fury.

"I can't keep a cap on her head, do what I will," apologized Hester, trying to smooth the stray looks; "so I've just giv' up a-tryin'. Granny, granny, the rector's come all the way from Tregarvan to see you," she added, raising her voice to a high-pitched scream.

Mr. Eskett advanced to the bedside, saying solemnly:

"Peace be to this house, and all that dwell in it."

Lord Glenhampton leaned silently against the wall, and Alice stood by the door, marveling at the strange scene in which she found herself, and half-terrified, in spite of her resolution to be brave.

Old Elison's drawn face stirred with some dim perception of what was passing around her.

"He's very kind, and I'm thankful to him, lass," she answered, in a shrill, piping voice; "but there ain't nothing he can do for me. It's all atween me and my Maker now."

"Tell her who is here, Hester," said Mr. Eskett, with a motion of his hand toward Lord Glenhampton.

"Granny!" shrieked Hester again, "there's a grand gentleman come with him from furrin parts—the Earl of Glenhampton," and Hester unconsciously courtesied as she uttered the august name.

Elison Polwheal opened her eyes wide and strove to lift her head from the pillows.

"Earl of Glenhampton?" she repeated. "Who is it that's talkin' about the Earl of Glenhampton? I knew his lordship once, but that was years ago."

"He's here now, granny!" cried Hester.

And at the same moment the earl advanced to where she could see his face.

For an instant she stared fixedly at him, as if to be certain that it was really he whom she beheld.

"And what brings ye here, Lord Adelbert Glenhampton?" she asked, speaking slowly and in hollow tones. "Are ye come to hold back my spirit from the other world? I knew it would be so—I knew you would come and stand at my bedside when the call came—for all these weary days and nights my soul has gone out into the great gulf of darkness seeking yours. I could not die with the black secret on my soul!" she added, shuddering. "I've been a true and a leal servant to Lady Edith all these years. I could live on and hold my tongue for her sake were it a hundred years more, but I could not die with a lie on my lips."

"Shall I tell you what the secret is, Elison Polwheal?" asked Lord Glenhampton, his deep tones searching her dulled senses with distinct accents.

"You do not know it! You never knew it!" she uttered, vehemently. "I swore with my hand on the Bible never to tell it."

"Nevertheless I know it!" he answered. "My little babes were not drowned in the Medway—it is not they who lie confined in the mausoleum at Glenhampton."

"Who has told you this?" she gasped.

He beckoned to Alice to approach. She advanced, with a look of awe upon her lovely young face, and bent her eyes seriously on Elison Polwheal's ghastly face.

"One of them stands before you now," said Lord Glenhampton. "I knew her when I saw her, from her wonderful likeness to her buried mother."

"And it is to me that she owes her life," said Elison, her restless fingers working ceaselessly at the coverlid on which they lay. "Let them go away, Lord Glenhampton, and I will tell you all—the Lord be praised that my guilty conscience can be lightened of its load, even though it be at the eleventh hour!"

Mr. Eskett motioned Hester Jones and Alice Evelyn to withdraw, himself remaining by the window beyond Elison's vision, at a signal from the earl—and the dying woman commenced her story of treachery and wrong, in a tone that had grown low and hoarse:

"It was all planned, my lord, before you went with her to Italy. Ever since there was the likelihood of a child bein' born to her she grudged the little things the ground they trod on, the clothes they wore, the very air they breathed—it was all somethin' taken away from her own

child—and she used to sit at her window, with her chin leanin' on her hand, and her eyes fixed on them little ones, as if she could ha' murdered them and thought it no wrong. For even the wild beasts, my lord, they have an instinct for their own young, and there was always a streak of the tigress in Lady Edith's hot Indian blood. We never said much about it in words, my lord, but I understood what she wanted, and I promised her it should be done—that when she came back from foreign parts they should not stand in her way."

"Woman!" gasped Lord Glenhampton, "you did not dream of—murder!"

"I must tell my tale in my own way," crooned Elison, irritably. "Murder! Why, we that had lived in India thought no more of such things than of killing a troublesome insect who had stung us. Human life isn't the same thing there that it is here. Where was I?—yes, I remember now. She went away—but my heart somehow failed me. I did not let the little innocents find their death in the river that ran at the foot of the fields. There was a gardener at the place, who was a poor feeble thing—he was going to the south of France with a colony, to work in the vineyards—and when they all thought the babes was dead in the river bottom, they was miles away in Jason Garfield's care. I paid him well for it—I could afford to do it, for my lady had been as generous as a queen!"

"But the corpses that were buried?" eagerly broke in Mr. Eskett, unable longer to conceal his presence. But Elison did not seem to mind it.

"Wait!" she muttered, rubbing her forehead feebly. "Wait! I remember it all—but ye put me out! Yes—the corpses. When the time had come, I took them myself from a far away cemetery church-yard—I knew where they were and how to get them, for we who have learned the secrets of the East have ways and means you do not wot of—and I dressed them in the babes' clothes, and I laid them in the water where they would be sure to be found—and you, Mr. Eskett, thought you were saying the funeral prayers over Lord Glenhampton's daughters, when they were only Madge Holson's poor little twins that died of scarlet fever two weeks before, and was put under ground at the parish charges."

"And what became of Jason Garfield?"

"I don't know," said Elison, her voice growing faint and dreamy. "He used to send to me for money every year—he was good to the little ones, I know, for he was a kind-hearted creature, though weak—but of late years I heard no more of him. He's dead, I suppose. Well, well, we must all die, and I've lived out more of the years of man or woman, already! And now, Lord Adelbert, you know it all! My lady cannot harm a dead woman, or her vengeance would follow me even to the grave!" she added, shuddering. "But tell her I kept her secret in life, and if Fate has undone her work it is through no fault of Elison Polwheal's. Close the casements, and go away—you that have disturbed a dying soul, for I've naught more to do with the world!"

And the next morning, when Lord Glenhampton and his recovered child, whose identity, especially after her own simple recital of the wandering life and the strange end of the old man, Jason Garfield, whom she had called "grandfather," he could no longer doubt, were on their way toward Glenhampton, Hester Jones came to tell the rector that old Elison was dead!

CHAPTER XXVIII.

RENA MAKES A DISCOVERY.

Renal Percival, all unawares of the ghostly fingers of Fate that were slowly but surely unraveling the mystery of her own life, was sitting at her window, one cheek resting on her hands, and her eyes fixed with an absent look on the distant deer which browsed contentedly on the sunny slopes of Glenhampton Park, when a knock sounded at her door. She started, as if it had been a peal of artillery, for at that moment her thoughts were far away from all surrounding objects.

"Come in!" she said, almost dreading to see any one appear just at that moment.

But it was neither Lady Blanche, full of her happy love, nor Georgine Cardiff, hopelessly in despair as to whether she should wear blue or pink that evening at dinner, that appeared—it was Antonia Clive.

"Will you go with me to visit the unused rooms in the Haunted Tower this evening, Miss Percival?" she asked.

"Certainly—at any time!" Rena answered, glad to escape from the melancholy society of her own thoughts for even a brief hour. "Have you got the keys?"

"No, but Mrs. Wadesleigh has gone for them."

She sat down by the open window and looked dreamily out upon the glowing summer landscape.

Mrs. Wadesleigh entered the room soon after.

"My lady is with Mr. Poynings in the blue drawing-room and it sounds like they was 'avin' 'igh words together, Miss Clive, and I daren't make bold to hask her for the keys," she said smoothing her apron, apologetically.

"Nonsense! I will go myself then," said Antonia, rising impatiently. "I know where she keeps them, and she has never refused me anything yet!"

Mrs. Wadesleigh looked after Miss Clive with mingled admiration and apprehension at her courage.

"To be sure," she said, "Miss Clive's a favorite with my lady, but I would never dare to go against her most particular horders, as long as I valleyed my situation!"

"Why?" asked Rena, carelessly. "What difference does it make?"

"My lady's specially particular about the tower keys," said Mrs. Wadesleigh; "and it ain't for no reason, neither, as I knows on, only we has all of us our ways, and my lady's dreadful set in hers, as it becomes the Countess of Glenhampton to be, for——"

She stopped, for Miss Clive at that moment returned with the keys in her hand.

"I knew I should find them," she said, quietly. "Miss Percival, come."

"And if I might make bold to haccompany you," said Mrs. Wadesleigh, "it might be good hopportunity for me to see as everything wasn't ruined houtright by moth and mildew, for in my humble hopinion it ain't no good shuttin' up rooms away from the sunshine and fresh hair days hin and days hout."

"Come if you choose," said Miss Clive, carelessly.

They crossed the court and ascended the narrow spiral stone stair-way that led up to the unused room in the tower, directly above the dreary chamber where Arthur Hunsworth's corpse had lain years ago, and Antonia Clive fearlessly turned the key in the creaking wards of the lock and threw open the ancient, oak-paneled door.

A gust of confined air, like the unwholesome exhalations of a charnel-house, rushed out upon them.

"The Lord 'av mercy on us!" said Mrs. Wadesleigh; "these windows do want hopening the worst way. I'm glad I came up with you, though my hold legs ain't what they used to be as far as stairs is concerned."

Rena looked round with mingled awe and curiosity, holding, child-like, to Miss Clive's black dress as she did so, for there was something weird and uncanny about the place. The suite of apartments consisted of one large room, with two smaller ones opening out of it; the floor of dark, waxed wood, was powdered over with fine dust, on which their footsteps made a labyrinth of tiny tracks, and folds of moth-eaten tapestry fluttered from the walls of the larger apartment. A huge chimney-piece, its fire-place inlaid with antique china tiles, occupied nearly one end of the room, and the three windows opposite were closely shuttered and draped with curtains of some dark, heavy stuff, which hung in straight, funereal folds from ceiling to floor.

As Mrs. Wadesleigh looped back these hangings, unclasped the shutters, and flung wide open the lattices, a stream of

sunshine flowed radiantly in, making the huge room look even more desolate than it did before, and Rena could see that the angles were filled with useless lumber, such as collects in every house—broken chairs, rolls of carpeting, pictures with their faces turned toward the wall, and heaps of books and papers, while broken china dragons grinned at her from the tall chimney-piece, and she had nearly stumbled over the canopy of a broken state-chair, whose velvet-cushioned back lay on the floor, a forgotten thing of the past.

"Dear me! dear me!" said Mrs. Wadesleigh, "if these books ain't well-nigh ruinationed by the rats and mice!"

She lifted up one or two as she spoke, and turned over their benibbled leaves with a piteous air of deprecation.

"They are of no consequence," said Antonia, absently.

"I beg your pardon, Miss Clive, for contradictin' of you, but books is books," said the housekeeper, dogmatically; "and I never could abare to see 'em go to destruction. And the moth is in the tapestry too, as I live, and a big 'old heaten out of the side of King Belshazzar's nose. Dear me! dear me!"

Mrs. Wadesleigh lifted the folds and shook them out with a reverent hand, while Rena stooped to examine a carved work-box or cabinet, on antiquely fashioned feet, which had been concealed by a heavy fringe of "King Belshazzar's Feast,"—the evident subject of the piece of tapestry, as Mrs. Wadesleigh knew by tradition, and Rena by conjecture.

"What curious old Japanese toy is this?" she asked, moving it forward. "It is like a yellow bone, all carved with black carvings like lace work!"

Mrs. Wadesleigh dropped King Belshazzar thereby filling the air with fine ashes—like dust.

"Yellow bone!" she cried, superciliously. "Why, it's the finest of hivory, as King Solomon's ships used to bring over, with hasses and peacocks—and where it's been all these years, I, for one, can't pretend to say. Why, Miss Percival, that work-box belonged to Lady Glenhampton when she was Mrs. Evelyn, twenty-two good years ago!"

"May I look at it?" asked Rena.

"There's no reason why you shouldn't," said Mrs. Wadesleigh, and Rena lifted the lid.

The interior was as quaint as the outside. There were

curious little drawers, with silver knobs inside, boxes, and needle caskets, each fitting into its peculiar niche with an exactitude and economy of space only seen in articles of Eastern workmanship, but one deep, narrow receptacle, whose lid Rena lifted off, was empty.

"I wonder what used to be kept here?" she asked, trying vainly to sound its depth with her slender forefinger. "See, Miss Clive, what a piece of ancestry I have found!"

Miss Clive came from the opposite side of the room where she had been looking at one or two dingy old paintings, black with age, whose canvasses were cracked so as nearly to obliterate the subjects protrayed on their surface.

"What is it?" she asked. "Let me look at it!"

Rena made way for her—but as her eye fell on the quaintly carved box, yellew with age, and exhaling a singular perfume of sandal-wood and teak, she uttered a low cry, and clasped her hands to her forehead.

"You have seen it before?" asked Rena. "Then you can tell me its history—all these old things must have histories of their own. It belonged to Lady Glenhampton, when she came here a bride."

But Miss Clive did not seem to know what she was saying.

'History!" she gasped, the shades of pallor, deadly and transparent, coming and going on her cheeks. "Stop—let me think—let me comprehend! Yes, it has a history—you are right! The darkness shall be made light—the hidden things revealed!"

"What do you mean, Miss Clive!" asked Rena, in surprise, while Mrs. Wadesleigh stood staring at her two companions in blank astonishment.

"Miss Clive is ill!" she exclaimed. "Stay you with her, Miss Rena, while I go for a glass of water."

She hurried away, and Antonia turned to Rena with a haggard wildness.

"My dagger!" she said, in husky accents, which seemed to struggle up from beneath a great weight on her chest. "My dagger!"

Still Rena gazed at her, uncomprehendingly.

"I don't know what you mean!"

Antonia caught the concealed weapon from her breast.

"Look for yourself, child!" she gasped. "Could the Lord's hand point out a mystery more plainly? There lies

its empty casket. See the ear-rings—the serpents—and the dragon, and the hideous human faces! I know them all by heart—I have studied their every line for years! Don't you see that the devices tally in every respect? The dagger, which wrought his death, was taken from that very receptacle. Do you see how exactly it fits?"

She placed the rusted instrument in the square casket, and replaced the lid. It was evidently the integral part of the East Indian work-box.

"But, Miss Clive!" cried Rena, recovering the speech that had deserted her in the breathless horror of the moment, "you must surely be mistaken; the work-box belongs to the Countess of Glenhampton!"

Antonia's face grew dark—a livid light flashed into her eyes.

"I am not mistaken!" she said, slowly. "The work-box belongs to the Countess of Glenhampton, and it was the hand of the Countess of Glenhampton that murdered Arthur Hunsworth! She—she wrought the cruel, dastardly deed—the woman I have loved and trusted all these years! But that is over now, and my revenge has come at last!"

She broke from Rena's restraining embrace, and holding the dagger tightly clasped in her hand, rushed from the room as swiftly and as silently as a flying shadow, moaning, as she went:

"Revenge! revenge! At last! at last!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

IN THE BLUE DRAWING-ROOM.

The journey across England, in which the Earl of Glenhampton was accompanied by his newly recovered daughter, was one fraught with the deepest and tenderest interest to him. Alice's recollection of her life with old Jason Garfield—her description of the beautiful sister, who was even now beneath the shadows of her ancestral home, never once dreaming of the right that she possessed there—her innocent questions, and the joy with which her hungered nature took in all the fullness of a father's love—were alike delightful to the solitary man, who seemed to behold in her once again the lineaments and expression of the woman he had loved so dearly and lost so long ago—Allegra, the first Countess of Glenhampton.

Alice—or Allegra, as her father persisted now in calling her—shook her head with a happy, blushing laugh, as she looked up once in the course of their journey and beheld the earl's dark, sad eyes fixed upon her with admiring tenderness.

"You will not have a second look for me, papa," she said, archly, "when you have seen Rena. Rena is far, far more beautiful than I!"

"Is she like you, Allegra?"

"Oh, no—no, papa! Rena is—yes, she is like you," added Allegra, the sudden conviction flashing into her mind, as she looked earnestly into her father's face. "Her profile is like yours, and she has just such dark eyes as you have—but every one thinks Rena so beautiful! You have seen her, Ernest—tell papa about her."

Captain Evelyn, who was as yet in ignorance of the development concerning his mother's plots and maneuvering wickedness, which had so recently transpired, pulled his mustache a little awkwardly, and felt himself color beneath the bronze of sunshine and wind which the last few weeks had bestowed upon brow and temple.

"She's very handsome," said Ernest; "but after all I like this little girl the best."

"And you are right, Ernest," said the earl, sadly. "A

true-hearted woman is one of the noblest of God's creatures —a false and wicked one the worst!"

"Papa," said Allegra, softly, her violet blue eyes fixed upon his face with a wistful, entreating tenderness. "Papa, do not think of that any more. It is over and past, and all that remains for us is to forget and forgive."

Captain Evelyn, whose ideas on the subject of the discovery of his beautiful young wife's true birth were rather vague and confused, inasmuch as all that he had heard was that the lost twin daughters of the house of Glenhampton proved unexpectedly to be no other than Rena and Alice Percival, looked puzzled.

"Forget what? Forgive whom?" he asked.

"You will know one day, my boy," said the earl. "Until then, let ignorance be bliss."

And a sudden, involuntary thrill passed through his heart, as he thought how near his cherished children had been to him on the night when the deserted lodge was burned. One daughter nestling in luxury beneath the frescoed magnificence of Glenhampton Castle, the other two wandering forlorn and friendless through the desolate country roads, and seeking shelter beneath the wayside hedges—what a contrast was there! And he bit his lip with stern determination, as he thought of the beautiful, wicked woman who had done it all!

He had not even telegraphed the news of his intended arrival at Glenhampton. It was his wish to appear there with his newly found daughter without a word of warning which might have set the countess maneuvering anew. Katherine was there, and her identity must not be divulged until he himself was there to protect her, for the earl felt that his wife was too subtle and dangerous to be trusted even for an instant with the girl whom she believed that her plots had done to death eighteen long years ago.

It was nearly noon when the carriage which the earl had engaged at the railroad station drove up to the side entrance of the castle. Harper was sitting, nodding in his chair in the hall. He started to his feet, with a smothered exclamation, as the carriage wheels crunched over the snow-white gravel.

"My lord!" he exclaimed, "we did not know—we never expected——"

"Hush!" said Lord Glenhampton, lifting his finger warn-

ingly. "My arrival here is a secret for the present. Let your lips be sealed as you value your place."

"Certainly, my lord," said the footman, in great bewilderment.

"Ernest," said the earl, turning to his step-son, "take Allegra at once to your own suite of apartments. I believe they are generally kept in readiness, whether you are at home or abroad. She needs rest after her journey, and I should prefer that at present she should not meet the countess." He never called her "my wife" again.

"But, Rena—my sister, papa!"

The earl's stern countenance softened into strange tenderness.

"I will see that you are not long kept apart, my daughter," he answered, and Allegra, habitually obedient, followed her husband through the wide, softly carpeted corridors. Captain Evelyn pulled mercilessly at his mustache, as he offered his arm to Allegra—he only hoped that his step-father's evident pleasure in his marriage might communicate itself to the countess also—for bold though his nature was, he felt undeniably nervous on the subject of presenting his bride to Lady Glenhampton.

The earl stood in the portico until Captain Evelyn and his young wife had disappeared, and then went directly to the blue drawing-room, where he knew his wife often spent her morning hours at this lovely season of the year.

Lady Glenhampton's scarlet camel's hair scarf lay on the sofa, a token that she had recently occupied the apartment; but she was not there now. One person only stood in the middle of the room, gnawing fiercely at his nails, with a face such as Cain might have worn when first the instinct of murder entered into his soul. He looked up, with a sudden flash of surprise in his eyes, as the earl entered the apartment and stood facing him.

"You are welcome, my Lord Glenhampton," he said, advancing; and the earl, to his surprise, recognized Mr. Theodore Poynings, the family solicitor.

"I am much obliged to you, Mr. Poynings," said the earl, courteously, and about to pass on; "but I was looking for Lady Glenhampton."

Mr. Poynings placed himself resolutely in the way.

"My lord," he said, his voice quivering strangely, "will

you grant me a few minutes' audience first? I have that to impart to you which will brook no delay."

Lord Glenhampton looked at the man in surprise. Had he taken leave of his senses? Or upon what other grounds could his singular persistency be accounted for?

"Perhaps at some other time—" he commenced, haughtily; but Poyuings broke in once more:

"No other time will do as well," he said, with brusque insolence. "I warn you, my lord, once for all, that you had better listen to my story before the whole country-side is ringing with it!"

Lord Glenhampton stopped, calmly.

"What is it that you have to tell me, Poynings?" said he, quietly.

"Do you remember the murder of Arthur Hunsworth, years ago?"

"You, of all others, have no need to ask me that question, Mr. Poynings," answered the earl. "Whatever lesser events may escape my memory, I am not likely to forget that."

"Do you wish to know who was his murderer?"

"I would have given my right hand to know, at the time he met with his bloody death," responded the earl, with emotion; "I would give it still."

"I ask no such price as that, Lord Glenhampton; I only ask your attention. Will you hear my story out, or"—with a very perceptible sneer—"are you so anxious to rejoin your family as to be able to spare me no time?"

The earl sat down on the velvet sofa.

"Go on, Mr. Poynings," he said, with the cold courtesy that never forsook him; "I give you my undivided attention."

"To tell my story as it should be told," began Mr. Poynings, "I must request your lordship to convey your mind backward, equally with mine, to the night of the twenty-first of September, 18—."

"Will you not be seated, Mr. Poynings?" asked Lord Glenhampton.

"Thanks! I prefer to stand. The night of the twenty-first of September, 18—, Mr. Hunsworth came to our office, at about nine o'clock, apparently very much agitated. He sat down and wrote a note, which he requested me to take at once, with my own hands, to the Countess of Glenhampton. I obeyed. She was standing at the window, so that,

without attracting the attention of any one else in the apartment, I could easily hand it to her unseen, standing, as I did, on the marble terrace without. She read the note, and crumpled it up in her fingers. I asked her if there was any answer. 'There is none,' she answered. As it happens, I am skilled at reading faces, and I saw in hers that the billet contained something of no ordinary nature.

"That there was some secret between my master and Lady Glenhampton I was quite certain, and as secrets are useful things to men of my profession, I determined to fathom the matter to its very bottom. Almost immediately on my return Mr. Hunsworth went out, and I followed him."

"You did not tell all this on the occasion of the coroner's inquest in this castle," interrupted Lord Glenhampton.

Poynings smiled mockingly.

"I am quite aware of it, my lord earl. It was not my policy at that time to impart all that I knew. As I was saying," he added, after a moment's pause, "I followed him into the dell beside the deer park. He waited there some time, so did I, behind the gnarled trunk of the great beach tree, which, if your lordship remembers, stands near the southern angle of the dell—but both of our vigils were rewarded in time. The Countess of Glenhampton, with her evening dress completely enveloped under a black cloak, whose hood also covered her head, except in one place, where I could see the Glenhampton diamonds flash out in the starlight, came over the dewy grass, moving quick and light, and with her face deadly pale. I was where I could hear their voices distinctly; you can imagine how earnestly I listened for every accent. Ay, I see your lordship's lip curl. Eavesdropping is not the action of an honorable man, I grant you, but we who have not the good fortune to be born in purple and fine linen must work our way up the ladder of life as best we may. And I was rewarded for not being over-scrupulous by the tidings that I heard. Hunsworth told the countess, your wife"—Poynings spoke slowly, giving emphasis to every word separately and distinctly as it passed his lips—"that he had that night discovered the existence of the twin daughters of the house of Glenhampton, supposed to have been dead for more than seven years—that at that moment they were in the ruined lodge, passing as the grandchildren of old Jason Garfield, who, as I understood it, had been liberally rewarded to put them out of the way—a

polite phrase, as I take it," he added, sneeringly, "for *murder!* And he told the countess that he regarded it as her bounden duty to divulge the monstrous conspiracy, of which he had become aware that night for the first time, to the earl. My Lady Glenhampton denied nothing—she was wise enough to perceive that no falsehood or double-dealing with facts could avail her at that moment—but she tried to drag him also in the foul plot. She offered him reward, bribes—I can scarcely remember what—to continue to conceal the story into which he had gained an insight through the voluntary confession of the old man, a confession all of whose details I was not so fortunate as to hear. But Hunsworth was one of those fools whom the world calls 'men of honor,' and he refused every tempting prospect and golden bribe. And then she shifted her ground and begged for time. She would herself tell her husband all; the children should be restored to their rights, and the errors of the past be amply atoned for—only he must let her choose her own time. At all events, the earl should know all the next morning at farthest; and to this compromise Hunsworth reluctantly consented. She thanked him with the utmest fervor for his forbearance—and they parted. She turned away; he stood for a moment lighting his cigar under the very boughs of the tree behind which I crouched—and in that instant a shadow crept between me and the starlight—Lady Glenhampton's shadow—and I saw the white, sheeny gleam of a blade in the air, I heard the bubbling cry of the murdered man, and saw him fall among the daisies and the long ferns, which closed above him as if to hide the corpse from sight. I never beheld a thing more instantaneously done; he must have died as he fell. And then she stooped above him and seemed to be searching or feeling for something, probably to see if life was quite extinct, for it is scarcely well to leave such a job as that half done. Ay, Lord Glenhampton, you may well groan and clasp your hands over your eyes, but I tell you that I looked upon this with my own eyes."

"But why—why——" gasped the wretched earl, without taking his hands from his eyes.

"Why have I kept silent all these years? Do you suppose I would make town talk of a secret that was worth to me a golden guinea for every hour of silence? No, Lord Glenhampton, I was no such unfledged fool as that. Your countess has made it well worth my while, up to this time,

to bury the past in secrecy and gloom. I told her what I had seen the morning of the inquest, but I took good care to be where she could not serve me as she had served my master. She was a brave woman, but she dared not stain her soul with another crime. Since then she has built up my fortune in every possible way, for she has been a generous patroness, as you well know, my lord—up to this time—but the last boon I asked at her hands she has seen fit to refuse, and our compact is at an end! It is not every man who would be willing to marry the daughter of a murderess, yet I would have made Lady Blanche Arden my wife, and it is that which she has denied to me within the last hour!"

"And she has done well!" said Lord Glenhampton, rising to his feet, while his whole frame quivered with suppressed passion. "Perjured witness, false servant, foul-tongued liar, and you dared to aspire to the hand of a noble lady like my daughter! Leave the house this instant or I swear I will fling you out of yonder window as if you were a dog!"

Poynings' color changed; he shrank back, totally taken unawares.

"My lord, you forget what I know—you forget what I can tell through all the length and breadth of England!"

"Tell what you please!" thundered Lord Glenhampton. "Proclaim to the world, if you choose, the foul part you have played—you cannot strike the iron into my soul any deeper than it now rankles. I, for one, will have no compromises with a traitorous wretch like you! Now go; I will have no word more to say to you!"

Poynings, keenly disappointed in the way in which Lord Glenhampton had taken this frightful revelation, crept out of the blue drawing-room, his teeth tightly clenched together, and his eyes literally blazing with fury. But he might have felt in some degree avenged, if he could have seen how quickly Lord Glenhampton's forced fortitude gave way after he disappeared—if he could have heard the bitter groan with which the earl sank back upon the sofa.

CHAPTER XXX.

LADY GLENHAMPTON'S CONFESSION.

In the corridor, a few hundred feet beyond the canopied door of the blue drawing-room, Theodore Poynings met Lady Glenhampton, coming with her usual slow, graceful manner, toward him. Her face was very pale and drawn, like one who has passed through the crisis of a long sickness, but she smiled as she looked into his face.

"Mr. Poynings," she said, "we parted, just now, in anger, but perhaps we did not sufficiently consider——"

"Your blandishments are all thrown away, Countess of Glenhampton," interrupted Poynings, speaking in a voice that was more like the shriek of a wild animal than the tone of a human being. "It is too late now for you to attempt to come to terms—your guilty secret is betrayed! Go on your way, my proud countess—all the world will soon know the mystery of the blood-stains on your jeweled hands!"

He passed by her without another word, but he could read in her blanched features and paralyzed attitude the sweet fullness of his revenge!

Unable to fully comprehend his words, yet secretly impressed with their terrible import, Lady Glenhampton went on to the blue drawing-room and opened the door, feeling that rest and solitude must be gained at once, or her throbbing brain would burst! She must have time to think and plan—she must have a season alone with herself to contemplate this new and frightful complication of affairs.

As she came into the stately apartment, her eyes fixed intently on the floor, and her head drooping on her breast, she became vaguely conscious of another's presence in the room, and looked up—to meet the stern and fiery gaze of her husband.

"Adelbert!" she exclaimed, and with the instinct of subtle diplomacy that still clung to her, the tones of her voice grew deliciously sweet, "my dearest lord! this is a pleasure I had not expected."

She came forward with a bright smile and outstretched arms, but he shrank back as if her radiant beauty were the hideous repulsiveness of a charnel-house.

"Woman! do not touch me!" he uttered. "Do not dare to extend to me the hand which murdered Arthur Hunsworth!"

She sank on a chair, as suddenly as if his words had been a bullet speeding to her heart, and covered her face with her hands.

"Adelbert! you too!" she gasped, faintly.

"Is it true?" he demanded, standing before her with unbending severity, although her piteous accents might have melted a heart of stone.

"It is true!" she answered, suddenly dropping her hands and seeming to fling aside all disguise with the boldness of desperation. "Yes, it is true! I did the deed, but it was for Blanche! Do not even the wild beasts of the jungle fight for their young? And now—now—" with her voice dying into a groan of inexpressible anguish, "it is all in vain—the black shadow of her wretched mother's guilt will darken her innocent young life. If I could perish upon the scaffold alone I would not care—if I alone could bear the guilt, and contumely, and scorn—but my child would have to bear it all! I did it! I planned that the children should—no, not be drowned—I had not reached the stage of murder, then," she added, bitterly, "but fall into the river, in their childish play, when no human aid was nigh to rescue them. But my accomplices were too weak, or too scrupulous to carry out the details of the bold scheme I had marked for them. They had not even the courage and resolution to keep them forever in the far away land, whither they took them. Would I have allowed them to come back as the heiresses of Glenhampton and snatch my little Blanche's inheritance from her hands? No one but Arthur Hunsworth knew the real history of the children in the deserted lodge, or was acquainted with old Jason Garfield's identity. I put him out of the way forever!" she said, recklessly. "And then I came back to the castle and dressed myself in the clothes that lay by Antonia's bedside—she was addicted to sleep walking at times of unusual weariness or excitement, you know, and I resolved that if any suspicion were awakened it should not fall upon me. I put up my own abundant hair and fastened on the flaxen wig I had worn in tableaux, only the Christmas before, and I crept, at the dead of night, to the deserted lodge, and looked upon the sleeping faces of Allegra's children as they lay there side by side. I

hated them because they stood between my little one and the boundless wealth that would else be hers; I hated them because I knew you had never loved me as you loved their dead mother; I hated them, because after the lapse of years of fancied security, they had come back to imperil all my hopes and plans! Could any one expect me to have mercy upon them? Old Jason Garfield was dead! I knew from the ghastly hue upon his face that I had nothing further to fear from him, and as I went out across the threshold, I decreed the destiny of those children in my heart! One of them had wakened with a start as I glided by her—oh! had she but known the shadow of peril that hung over her!"

Lady Glenhampton paused for a moment and wiped the cold dew from her marble white forehead. Her husband stood with folded arms and compressed lips, listening to her frightful tale.

"I waited in the shadow of the hemlocks beyond," she went on, "until all was silent, and then I crept back and threw a lighted match among the molded tresses of hay in an out-building, from which I knew the flames must inevitably communicate with the lodge when they had smothered their way through the latticed door, and then I hurried back to the house. I was in time, fortunately—the progress of the flames was slow and imperceptible at first, and at one period I stood on the terrace half resolved to go back and complete the work which seemed frustrated for the moment. Yes, it was my hand which burned that wretched hovel to the ground," she added, slowly, with her eyes fixed upon space, while a shiver thrilled through her whole frame. "Oh, those sleeping faces. I have seen them every day and every hour since—in my dreams at night, rising up before me like phantom guests, when the gayest scenes surrounded me. I have never once regretted the blow I struck the hypocrite, Hunsworth, except for poor Antonia Clive's sake, but I would to Heaven the weight of those children's blood could be lifted off my soul!"

"And it is lifted off," said Lord Glenhampton, speaking the words by an evident effort. "Look, there, Edith!"

He drew back the azure satin folds of the curtain as he spoke and pointed to the terrace beneath where Ernest Evelyn sat, indolently inhaling the blue incense of his inseparable companion, a cigar, while his young wife stood leaning over his chair, her eyes fixed dreamily on the upper windows

of the house, as if she were wondering which of these stately rooms enshrined the jewel of her admiring love, her sister Rena.

"It is Ernest!" exclaimed Lady Glenhampton. "When did he come home?"

"With me, this morning."

"And does he know?" she faltered.

"He knows nothing as yet," answered the earl.

The countess drew a long respiration of relief. The whole world would be ringing with her wicked deeds ere long, yet she was thankful that Ernest Evelyn was still in ignorance of his mother's crimes.

For a little while she might yet breathe freely—yes, for a little while.

"Do you see the young girl standing beside him?" pursued Lord Glenhampton, his eyes riveted sternly on the countess' face.

"Is it his wife?" she asked slowly; "the Alice Percival whom he has married in defiance of all my hopes and wishes?"

"The world calls her Alice Percival," answered the earl; "but she is my daughter, and her name is Allegra Morrilla Arden. Her sister, whom you know as Rena Percival, is now in this very house."

The feverish scarlet went and came on Lady Glenhampton's cheek as she listened with wild, incredulous eyes.

"Impossible!" she gasped, her parched throat almost refusing to syllable the word. "Do the dead rise from their graves?"

"No, Edith Glenhampton, but Heaven's own hand warded off the sword of evil from the innocent babies who had no friend but Him!" her husband answered, solemnly. "The awful doom your hand would have meted out to them was averted by One more mighty than you. They escaped from the lodge, terrified at discovering that the old man, whom they supposed to be their grandfather, was dead, and wandered away in the darkness from the impending shadow of a fate too terrible to contemplate. So far as my children are concerned your soul is bloodless save in the fiend-like intent."

She clasped her hands wildly together, heedless of how the golden bands and many facets of the precious stones she wore cut into her flesh

"Thank Heaven for that!" she cried. "Oh, thank Heaven for that!"

"Woman!" hissed a voice, close to her ear, "how dare you invoke the sacred name of Heaven?"

The countess turned with a low, startled cry, and beheld Antonia Clive in her black garments and ghastly white face, standing close to her, while Rena Percival, vainly strove to hold her back with hands whose frail strength was to the half insane vehemency of the older woman as a tiny bark endeavoring to stem the rush of Niagara's fiercest torrent.

"You killed him, Edith Glenhampton!" she gasped. "You murdered the man who was to be my husband—to whom my troth and heart were alike plighted! Why did you do the bloody deed?"

Lady Glenhampton lifted her sullen, defiant eyes to Antonia's piercing gaze; she knew now that there was no further avail in any semblance of deceit.

"Because I hated him!" she answered, with slow, deliberate accents.

"I think Miss Clive's mind is disordered," said Rena, her own face white as death. "Will you help me to take her away? She may do some frightful deed of violence, else!"

Lord Glenhampton stepped forward, but before he had time to interpose Antonia sprang upon the countess with a motion like the bound of a tigress.

"Fiend! murderess!" she uttered, in a choked voice, "but he shall be avenged. I have sworn it, and the hour and the day have come!"

Rena uttered a piercing shriek, which was echoed in Lord Glenhampton's deeper tones, for, before mortal aid could avail to reach the wretched woman the dagger Antonia Clive had carried in readiness all these years was sheathed in the countess' heart.

And with uplifted hands Antonia stood there, her face as radiant as if she had offered some acceptable sacrifice to the Judge of all men.

"My lost one! my murdered love!" she murmured, softly "I vowed it, and it is done! You are avenged at last, and it is my hand that has filled the cup of expiation! The long years—the many years—but I have not lived through them in vain!"

And as Antonia Clive looked up to the earl's shocked face, he saw the light of hopeless insanity shining in her eyes.

CHAPTER XXXI.

RENA PERCIVAL'S FATE.

The mystery at Glenhampton Castle was no longer a mystery, and for a few months the painful notoriety of the terrible events which had transpired there, both in the past and present, rendered the temporary absence of the family an imperative necessity. Miss Clive had, in the meantime, been placed in a private lunatic asylum.

And while the castle was shrouded in closed blinds, the twice-widowed Earl of Glenhampton, with his three beautiful daughters, was dwelling in one of the lovely sheltered vales that edge the Lake of Geneva in Switzerland, trying to forget all but the peaceful present.

Lady Blanche Arden had perhaps suffered more than any of the rest of the family in the horrible events which had so recently transpired. She had loved and trusted in her mother so fully that it was like rending away a portion of her own being, to be compelled to lose that faith. The love she could not lose—her real nature was like that of the heroine of the old ballad who sings so mournfully :

"I know not, I care not, if guilt's in that heart,
I but know that I love thee whatever thou art!"

And so she mourned and worshiped her mother's memory, even while she knew that the memory was overshadowed by the thick darkness of an awful crime!

But youth is essentially elastic and Heaven has mercifully decreed that the heaviest shall not always have power to overshadow our souls. Moreover there were other influences which tended to soften the poignancy of Blanche's sufferings.

"Vere will not care for me now," she had told herself, in an agony of tears when first the terrible truth burst upon her. "I must write to him at once and tell him that I shall not expect him to be bound by the engagement formed under such different circumstances."

"If he is the noble gentleman I have heretofore believed him to be," returned Rena—somehow the name of "Lady Katherine" did not suit her half so well as the pretty diminutive by which they still continued to call her—"these sad occurrences will make no difference to his loyalty to you, Blanche, darling."

"Do you really think so?" asked the girl, lifting her swollen eyes to the lovely face of her comforter. "Oh, Rena, what should I do without you to uphold my fainting heart? I have leaned unconsciously on you always, never dreaming it was a sister's love that was so precious to me. But at least I ought to give Vere Temple the alternative of withdrawing from our engagement if it seem proper to him."

"Yes," answered Rena, "I should do that; but I do not think you need have any fears for the result, Blanche."

And the sequel proved Rena to have been in the right. Lord Vere Temple's answer was too bulky to be put in the post—in fact, it came in an open barouche, and consisted of himself, very indignant at the idea that Blanche could ever dream of dissolving their troth.

"And if I hadn't been in the south of France, hunting up a villa for our honey-moon in a secluded vale where tourists are unknown and couriers can be left behind, I should have been here long ago," he said, in an injured voice. "Blanche, Blanche! do you think I would willingly give up the wearing of such a white pearl as you are upon my heart!"

"But things are so different now, Vere," faltered the pale little bride-elect.

"Not to me, darling," the young man answered, enthusiastically. "We shall have to wait a little longer, that is all. Now tell me the whole story. So far I have heard only disjointed rumors and exaggerated reports."

And in her lover's hearty sympathy and generous partisanship, Lady Blanche Arden began to believe that the world might yet be bright to her when this blackness of darkness had vanished away into the past.

As for the task of Lady Allegra Evelyn—that of softening to her young husband the blow of his mother's disgrace and death—it was not so difficult as at the first outset it might have appeared. Captain Evelyn was very much downcast at first, but his nature fortunately did not possess the depth of his sister's, and after the first suddenness of the tragedy had worn itself away, he soon reconciled himself to the inevitable.

Captain Ernest had chosen well when he made a stolen marriage of it with the Reverend Ralph Eskett's pretty governess, and he never for an instant regretted that Rena Percival had refused him so unceremoniously.

Blanche and Allegra, as it thus happened, each had separate loves and interests of their own, and Rena was apparently alone.

"I shall never marry, papa," said she, sitting, one afternoon, on one of the flat, level terraces that overhung the lake. "I am going to stay with you always, and be your companion and comforter."

"You will be that, whether you marry or remain single," the earl answered, drawing her tenderly to his side. "Do you know, my little Katherine, that you are very young to register a vow of eternal celibacy?"

"But I am in erneast for all that, papa," she persisted.

"You think you are, Rena."

She shook back her shining dark curls, and looked smilingly into his face.

"You will see, papa," she answered, gayly. "Somehow I feel myself gifted with the spirit of prophecy and foresight this evening. I can see all my future life sketched out before me like one of the maps in Ernest's guide-books."

The earl looked at her with a proud, amused smile.

"Tell me what it is that you see," he said, humoring her fancy.

"I see you and myself all alone at Glenhampton Castle—for Vere and Ernest will take my sisters away to independent homes of their own in time—walking all alone on the terraces in the summer evenings, sitting all alone by the fire in the great drawing-room on winter nights. We shall be very happy, papa, because we love one another so much, but it will be a serene, quiet sort of happiness, like the sunshine of a September day. Oh, papa, I have the love of so

many lonely years garnered up for you in my heart!" she cried, passionately.

He touched his lips caressingly to her forehead.

"But," he added, chancing to turn his head, "who is that coming up the path from the steamboat-landing?"

Rena leaned forward to look, and as she looked, a crimson shadow crept over her cheek.

"It is the Marquis of Balfour," she said, almost beneath her breath.

"The Duke of St. Burgoyne's son? Yes," said Lord Glenhampton, "I remember him as a very fine man. But how has he managed to find us out here?"

Lord Balfour was warmly greeted by the whole party, who gathered around to welcome him, and to hear the latest news from England.

"But I did not come from England," said Lord Balfour. "I chanced to be somewhere in the neighborhood of the sources of the Nile, with a party of friends, when I received a letter from my mother telling me of the extraordinary good fortune which had happened to the Earl of Glenhampton—the unexpected discovery of his long lost daughters. Of course I came at once to offer my congratulations."

Rena sat leaning her forehead on her hand, and marking tiny circles around the roots of the daisies with the point of her parasol. She did not look up, but her heart beat tumultuously within her bosom at his words, "to offer his congratulations." Was that all he had come for?

For she felt now the value and magnitude of the treasure she had allowed to slip from her hands. Lady Katherine Arden would perhaps be a more fitting bride for the Marquis of Balfour than the nameless and obscure Rena Percival.

But it was not until after dinner that he found an opportunity to speak to her alone.

Lord Glenhampton unwilling to brave at his years the chill of the night air sweeping over the lake had gone to his book. Lord Vere, who had persuaded Blanche that nightingales haunted an upper ledge of a sloping hill-side had lured her up the heighths to listen for their music, and Ernest Evelyn and his wife had turned toward Villeneuve to see if any letters awaited them there; and so it happened that Lady Katherine and the Marquis of Balfour were alone on the terrace, where the former had sketched out the pro-

gramme of her own future life that afternoon. How changed all seemed now!

"Rena," he said, speaking in a low, earnest voice, "do you know what has brought me to the Lake of Geneva?"

"You said you had come to congratulate papa!" she answered, almost inaudibly.

"But I might easily have done that by letter, instead of coming all the way from the River Nile here!"

She was silent; in truth and in fact, our ready Rena for once did not know what to say!

"I have brought you a letter from my mother, Rena," he said, after a moment's pause, "a letter which expresses in her own words her love and esteem for you, and her entire appreciation of your noble character. But——" and he smilingly withheld it from her outstretched hand, "you must not read it until you have first answered a question, which I have to ask you!"

"What is it?"

"I see from your face that you guess it," he said. "Dear Rena, you know it already. You sent me away from you once before, but I am ready to serve for your love as many years as Jacob served for Rachel. Once more, my dearest, will you become my wife?"

And this time, Rena's answer was not "No!"

The Marquis of Balfour had a long interview with Lord Glenhampton that evening, and when it was over and the young man was once more en route for Villeneuve, the earl called Rena to him.

"Well, my darling," he said to her, imprisoning in his own the little hand that would tremble like a frightened bird in his tender clasp, "what is it about the map of your life to-night?"

Her eyes fell.

"Papa—if you disapprove——"

"But I do not disapprove," he interrupted. "On the contrary I think Lord Balfour one of the finest fellows I ever had the good fortune to know, and I am quite certain, my dark-eyed princess, that you will fill the position of future Duchess of St. Burgoyne, right royally. Nor do I think, Rena, that you will love your father one iota the less, because your heart goes naturally out to a husband's nearer claim!"

And thus bravely he gave up again the treasure he had

but newly gained, and Rena never knew how much the struggle cost him!

Here ends our story.

From poverty to wealth, from beggary to rank—from a schoolgirl's coquettish wiles to the fullness of such a love as might ennoble a queen—from a coarse garment of a charity refuge to the glittering coronet of a peeress—these were the contrasts and changes of Rena Percival's life. And now when the beautiful Marchioness of Balfour looks back upon the troubled current of her past existence it seems to her like the winding mazes of a dream! But do we not all know that truth is stranger than fiction?

[THE END.]

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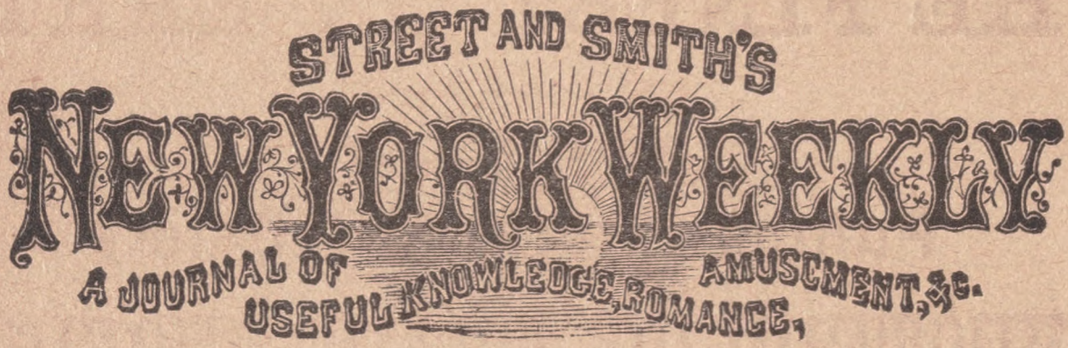

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